Some Sunny Day

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Some Sunny Day

by amirosebooks, daenw (freckledfoxes), oncethrown

Summary

At first it's because he smiled when Dean cracked a joke in class. Then it's because, years later while Dean is filling up at some small town gas station during a hunt, the guy's smile is just as bright, just as sincere.

Then it's a date.

Then it's kind of a thing.

Dean Winchester's high school crush reappears in his life while Sam is away at Stanford and Dean is hunting alone. At first it's just a one night thing. Fun, experimentation. Then it's relief. Then it's comfort.

Then it's complicated.

Notes

This started out as a Tumblr head cannon thread between daenw and amirosebooks, both of whom have awesome tumblrs that you should check out. Oncethrown kind of ran with it and all three people agreed to move it to AO3.

Chapter 1: The Original Headcannon Building

daenw

or if that's not your cup of tea, maybe dean is at a new school, bored to tears, and he sees a boy across the classroom that sets his heart a flutter and it's confusing and weird and sure, he's gotten boners over gunner lawless before but he's never admitted that's what it was, certainly it was the lady wrestlers setting him off… but the boy across the room smiles at him when dean cracks a joke in class and it feels like sunlight was poured directly into dean's lungs.

[image] amirosebooks

Yes and also, Dean going out of his way to hang out with the smiling guy. They don't have a lot in common but Dean feels compelled to make this guy laugh as much as possible and he doesn't really know why.

See also: Dean is as surprised as anyone when his protective instincts flare up one day when someone made the smiling guy sad.

[image] daenw

!!!! yes !!!!

dean's a little stricken by how much he likes this guy, and he chalks it up to nothing more than he just really wants to be friends with him at first, because dean doesn't like guys. dean's a ladies' man obviously. nothing wrong with liking guys, but that's just not dean.

but dean gets so blushy and fumbly around this guy. he makes jokes but sometimes flubs the punchline because the guy is smiling at him. one day he's blindsided by the urge to hold the guy's hand. he'd be scared if he didn't like hanging out with the guy so much. he wants to be his friend, he can keep it together.

that is until one day when dean is over at the guy's house to study (mostly dean is just staring while the guy is trying to do flashcards with him), and this guy decides during a fit of laughter to lean over and kiss dean's cheek.

[image] amirosebooks

And dammit, years later when Dean looks back on that sweet,

innocent kiss he wishes he could say he reacted well. That he blinked his green Bambi eyes at the guy before leaning in for a proper kiss. That they'd held hands or bumped knees while they continued to study.

Anything would have been better than the memory of the guy's expression falling as Dean pushed him away while exclaiming that he wasn't gay.

Sweet kisses and fumbling first crushes would have been better than getting back to their motel of the moment that night to see the Impala in the parking lot and John standing at the door telling him to grab his and Sammy's things because it was time to go again.

It would have been better than the memory of stopping at a gas station the next morning, nearly a state away from the smiling boy by then, and having Sam hang over the front seat to ask Dean why he looked like someone had just run over his dog or something.

Chapter 2: But Then

[image] daenw

oh nooooo it got sad!

BUT what if dean ran into the guy later on in life. dean's been hunting on his own, sam's at stanford, and dean is passing through this old town he used to go to school in and he runs into the guy while their both pumping gas at the local station. the guy is fresh out of college, smile just as bright and beautiful as the day dean first met him, and dean tries to keep himself from being noticed but the guys sees him and recognizes him and he seems genuinely happy to see dean, even though their friendship ended so badly.

dean's trying desperately not to mention their final moments together, afraid that this peace will break somehow if he tries to apologize. the guy asks him out to a bar, brave as he is, and dean can't find it in him to say no. he needs to stop for the night anyway, why not here?

[image] amirosebooks

It's not a date, Dean thought. *This is* not *a date.*

He had to remind himself of the facts a few times over as he secured his motel room, showered, and got dressed in the closest things he had to fancy clothes before forcing himself to take them off again in favor of something else.

You're being ridiculous, Dean thought.

He scowled at himself in the mirror one last time before hustling out the door.

Baby's comforting growl helped to calm his nerves for most of the drive through town to the bar he'd agreed to meet the smiling guy at. His anxiety kicked back up into a higher gear as he pulled into the bar parking lot.

What the hell are you doing? He asked himself as he threw Baby into park. The butterflies in his stomach weren't listening to his this isn't a fucking date mantra.

He cursed himself before climbing out of the car.

It felt like every eye in the lot was on him. Like every conversation had taken a turn toward him giving in to urges he'd tried so long to ignore.

Urges? He scoffed at himself as the door to the bar loomed ahead. It's not like this is a fucking date. It's just a beer with an old friend. There was nothing wrong with that. It didn't make him any less of a man.

With a steadying breath he pasted on his signature cocky smile and headed into the bar. The place was crowded for a weeknight in a small town, but Dean eventually spotted the smiling guy sitting at the bar. When he locked eyes with Dean he grinned and waved.

Dean's heart stuttered in his chest? Did the guy really get *more* distracting and gorgeous since high school?

Dean was screwed.

Chapter 3: A One Time Thing

[image] daenw

it's definitely a date. a gross, schmoopy, googly-eyed date. dean thinks the guy is trying to be subtle, or at least go easy on dean. but dean is a shameless flirt, albeit a fumbly one with men, and apparently so is this guy now. they keep bouncing once liners off each other like their playing quarters.

dean's a little drunk after two hours. they're cozy in their booth, bathed in warm lamplight and huddled over the table between them. dean feels heavy and his cheeks hurt from smiling and he can't really tell if the flush is the alcohol or the butterflies in his belly, but he doesn't think it matters anymore.

there's a quiet moment where they each take a drink. the guy sets his bottle down first and looks at dean from under dark lashes.

"you wanna get out of here?"

dean's stomach turns, the memory of their last time together rushing back, sobering him. he leans back from the guy a little, more nervous than he's been all night. the guy frowns, apologizes profusely, something about hoping and assuming making him and as and dean feels like a douche.

"i… i do, actually. want to get out of here. with you."

dean's admission stops the guy in his tracks, halfway through a tangent on why he needed to stop going after straight guys. there's an anticipatory silence, full of promise, and dean watches as a smile lights up the guy's face once again.

it's bright enough to tamp down on dean's nerves, nearly extinguishing them entirely.

dean doesn't want to bring the guy back to the motel. he'd rather go to his place so he could sneak out early in the morning. but the motel is closer, and they're both a little drunk, so they walk to dean's room and stumble in, the guy nearly glued to dean's side. he keeps touching dean, and each one send shocks up dean's spine.

the night is a blur– a flurry of touches and kisses. oddly enough,

there's a lot of laughter. dean's admission of his lack of experience is met with more excitement than anything.

Dean's not sure that anything has ever felt so good.

[image] amirosebooks

They didn't get much sleep. Not that sleep was very high on Dean's priority list that night.

Dean was surprised how easy everything is with this guy. In many ways it was just like being with a chick. And at the same time it was nothing alike.

Around three in the morning they woke up deciding they were more hungry than horny. It was a toss up between raiding the vending machine down the hall or make the trek up the street to the closest Gas-N-Sip. They ate their bounty sitting cross legged on the motel bed while making fun of late night infomercials.

When morning came Dean felt himself bracing for the inevitable *adiós*. He rested against the headboard, sheets still pooled around his hips while the guy finished up his shower. Dean plastered on his biggest lazy grin as the bathroom door opened.

[image] daenw

"Don't look at me like that now that I'm cleaned up," the guy said with a laugh when he came out of the bathroom, messy-haired and dewy-looking, and unfortunately fully-clothed.

The guy– Tom, Dean remembered– grabbed his wallet off the bedside table and slid it into his back pocket. Dean's stomach did a little flip when the bed dipped as Tom sat down to pull his shoes on.

Dean cleared his throat and wrung his hands. "Hey."

Tom looked up at Dean, face soft and curious. "Yeah?"

"Um… Y'know… Thanks for… um…" Dean shook his head and ran his hands through his hair. "And sorry, about… about back when I…"

Tom's smile faltered a little but it didn't completely fall. "I was wondering who was gonna crack first," he said, his words gentle. Dean looked down at his lap nervously for a moment, until Tom's hand slid up his thigh, no promise of anything, just a reassuring touch.

“We were kids, Dean. Kids are dumb sometimes. And cruel. And this town isn’t exactly liberal…” Tom paused, then added, “And I met your dad. I get it.”

Dean sighed and shook his head. “Yeah, but I… I shouldn’t have said that stuff to you.”

Tom took Dean’s hand and gave it a squeeze. Dean’s brain immediately jumped, shouting *pull away!!*, but he didn’t. He didn’t want to, not really.

“I forgive you,” Tom said softly, and it’s exactly what Dean needs. He felt it wash over him like cool water on a hot day. Dean gave him a grateful smile, finally, and lifted their hands to his lips.

They sat like that for a while, quiet and tense. Dean was bracing himself, and Tom seemed hesitant to leave.

It sucked.

Tom finally got to his feet, letting Dean’s hand go. Dean felt a little piece of himself slip away with it.

“I know this was a one-time thing,” Tom admitted, only a flicker of sadness in his tone. He opened the drawer in the bedside table and took out the pen and pad of paper. “But… I’m gonna give you my number anyway. Just in case.” He scribbled on it before resting it on top of Dean’s beat-up copy of *Cat’s Cradle*.

Dean looked up at him, not sure what to say, but was met with Tom’s lips on his, one last time, a definite goodbye. His eyes fluttered closed and he clung to Tom for as long as he could, until Tom pulled away and slipped out the door.

Chapter 4: Carthage, Oregon

Chapter by oncethrown

[image] oncethrown

Dean puts Tom's number in his phone under "Carthage", the name of the town, just to be safe. He's not expecting to ever call it, or even daring to imagine that Tom would pick up if Dean did call. Still. It's nice sometimes to scroll down and think that he could if he wanted to. Nice to scroll past the word Cathage and remember the guy there, who was sweet.

And forgiving.

Sometimes Dean lets himself wonder what things might have been like if he had just kept hunting alone and left Sam in school. And then he wonders if it even would have mattered. The yellow eyed demon would have found Sam whether Dean had dropped by Stanford or not. And Sam wouldn't have just gone back after what had happened to Jess.

It's nice not to hunt alone. It's even nicer to have his own hunting partner, and not have to worry about his father dropping in to take over a case from him at random. Hunting the yellow eyed demon is not exactly a pleasure cruise, but he's missed Sam more than he was admitting to himself. But it's not like new leads are cropping up every week. Sometimes it's just a new town and another monster. And one night Dean comes back to his and Sam's shitty motel room, with a bag of half decent take out food, and Sam has found a new monster.

In an old town.

Dean tells himself that he's going to focus on the case. If he runs into Tom…then he runs into him. He can leave that part to fate. He goes

over the news clips about the case with Sam. They spin theories and check Dad's journal for any insight it can offer.But 80 miles into the drive, Sam falls asleep. And with nothing directing Dean's thoughts, they wander.

It has been a couple years. He might have moved, or move past his "Hook-up with Drifters" phase.

He could have a boyfriend. Like a serious one.

Or…

But how would Dean ditch Sam? What would he even say? And did he even want to chance it?

The thing with Tom was this weird snow globe of a night. Perfect, isolated, protected, and frozen. The way things are going right now… it might be for the best if Dean just lets this go. Preserves that little bright spot he's been hanging on to.

But he could really use a bright spot tonight. By the time they cross the state line, Dean has a fully formed plan.

The first part of the plan is the easiest, but Dean's hands are still shaking when he pulls into a gas station and tells Sam to fill the tank while he goes inside to score some Twinkies. His hands shake worse as he locks himself in the single stall bathroom, pulls out his phone and calls the only number in his contacts that he's never dialed before.

Sam's annoyed when, as soon as Dean has dropped his duffle on one of the motel rooms twin beds and hung up his suit, he wants to go out to the bar. Dean is over selling it on purpose, pretending he wants to blow off steam, get a little drunk, hustle a little pool, pick up a chick, maybe even sing some karaoke. His false enthusiasm for the bar does what it's supposed to. It convinces Sam that what he wants to do is go to sleep. He strips down to his sleeping clothes and sanctimoniously unpacks his book as Dean changes into a cleaner version of the outfit he's already wearing, and heads out.

Dean's as nervous as he was the first time, and his nerves aren't

helped by the fact that he's got a half hour to kill before Tom is supposed to be here. He tries to sit at the bar and drink a whiskey soda fast enough to take the edge off. It's not working. So he orders two shots of whiskey, downs them, and takes his whiskey soda over to the pool tables.

He watches as some big brick house of a guy slams his last ball into the side pocket and starts haranguing the guy across the table from him, a tubby guy in a button down shirt that's showing some serious pit stains.

"Come on, man. You think you're too good to pay up? You gonna be a welcher?"

Dean rolls his eyes. That's roid rage if he's ever heard it.

"Calm the fuck down, man," Pitt Stains answers, grabbing his wallet out of his back pocket. "Give a guy two fucking seconds."

Pitt Stains pulls two bills out of his wallet, folds them in half and whips them Into Roid Rage's face. Dean laughs.

"You think that's funny?" Roid Rage demands of Dean. Pitt Stains, clearly brighter than he looks, uses the distraction to beat a hasty retreat.

"Yeah, I think it's pretty funny," Dean replies.

"You wanna step up, pretty boy? You wanna lose a couple C notes?"

Dean grins, pulls out his own wallet and fans out 500 dollars, waving them at the guy to the rhythm of the pounding in the guy's throbbing neck vein. "Five. Five C notes. You up for it?"

He answers with a grunt.

Dean calls break.

Hustling pool is easy and familiar. It's soothing to watch the table slowly clear, and the guy across from him go redder and redder.

Tom walks in just before what could have been Dean's last shot if the sight of him hadn't cause Dean to miss the cue ball entirely.

He's a little different now. Still skinny, but in a more grown up way than when Dean last saw him. His face has lengthened out, the apples of his cheeks are smoother, not as chubby. He's cut his blonde hair

short and he's wearing thick plastic rim glasses that might have been dorky on someone less cute.

Roid Rage snarls and sinks one ball while Dean grins at Tom and holds up one finger to let him know he'll be done with this in a second. Tom gives him a heads up, and points toward the bar.

It only takes until his next turn for Dean to clear the table and snatch Roid Rage's 500 bucks off the table while the asshole's friends hustle him out of the bar.

Tom sidles up to the table. "You wanna play again?"

"Sure," Dean says. He can feel the grin rolling across his face, and the little twitch of muscle as he leans forward to touch Tom, but pulls himself back, unsure of what to do.

Tom notices, but just smiles back. Dean clears his throat and waves the 500 dollars at him. "Don't worry, I won't make you bet on it."

Tom shrugs. "I could be persuaded to gamble."

"Alright. What'll it be?"

Tom steps a little closer. "How about the winner presses the loser up against that gorgeous car of yours, kisses him for any one in the parking lot to see, then goes back to my place to fuck him so good he can jerk off thinking about it for the next couple years?"

Dean swallows hard. Last time they'd just fooled around… but he can imagine it.

Tom seems to think he's overstepped. He kabashes the bedroom eyes, sets his hand on Dean's shoulder and leans back. "Sorry, too much?"

"Ummm, no," Dean answers. "No, it's not too much. Umm… I'll take that bet. I'll even let you break."

Dean leans back against the car, Tom pressed into him, kissing him senseless in a parking lot that is currently totally empty, but won't necessarily stay that way. It's thrilling.

"You threw that game, Winchester," Tom laughs.

Chapter 5: You Have My Number

Chapter by oncethrown

[image] oncethrown

“We’re almost there,” Tom whispers into Dean’s ear as he takes the left as Tom directed. “Another couple miles down this lane.”

They’re about a mile out of town, driving down some badly paved country road, the air so heavy with the smell of damp pine trees that it’s making Dean dizzy. Or that feeling could be from Tom’s arm wrapped around him, Tom’s mouth hot and gentle across his neck and that thrilled/horny/bubbly/terrified feeling Dean had felt last time he let himself do this cranking up to eleven, then higher and higher the closer they get to Tom’s house. He wants this so badly it scares him. He doesn’t know what that means about how he feels about women, or men, or even Tom specifically, and he knows whatever happens tonight is going to make him more confused, and the farther he drives the less he cares.

“Turn here,” Tom whispers. “You can park under the port cochere around the back.”

Dean takes the turn and follows up a gentle slope that winds its way in front of a small A-frame cottage and around the back.

“Should we go inside?” Dean asks.

“In a second,” Tom answers. “I never got to make out in a car like other teenagers. Mind indulging another little fantasy of mine for a couple minutes?”

Dean laughs and turns into Tom’s body, following easily as Tom pulls him down across the front seat.

“This whole place is yours?” Dean asks as they finally walk inside. It’s compact, but open and unreal in a way. Like if Hansel and Gretel had realized it was stupid to tangle with a crazy sweet-tooth witch and

had just made their way to Oregon in the 70's. There's a spiral stair case up to a second floor loft, where Dean can make out a huge bed. There's a TV, a large sectional couch and a couple recliners tucked under the loft, then a kitchen space with a small wooden table. The very front of the main floor space, where Dean and Tom are standing, is another living area, with a couple couches facing each other, a gigantic plush-looking rug, and a giant circular fire place that looks like it might just be big enough to heat the whole house.

"Yeah," Tom answers, kicking off his boots. "My dad and my uncles and I actually built it."

"Wow," Dean marvels, glancing over the place again.

"I'd give you the tour, but you can pretty much see everything from here." He laughs, sets his hands to Dean's hips and kisses him again. "How about you get comfortable while I pour us each a glass of wine and get the fire going?"

The idea sends a shiver down Dean's spine. It's so…. not what a one night stand is supposed to be. Wine by the fire place out in a cabin in the woods of the Pacific Northwest? It's… cheesy actually. Romantic.

Romantic as hell.

"Yeah." Dean clears his throat. "Yeah, okay. That sounds great."

He hangs his jacket on the rack by the door and unties his own boots, which he sets on a plastic mat next to the door. After a moment's hesitation he takes off his socks too. He can see Tom running up to the bedroom loft and grabbing something off the shelves before heading back down into the kitchen area and pulling wine glasses out of a rack hanging above the sink. Everything in the house is neat as a pin, thoughtfully stored, and clean and modern in a way that's almost overwhelmingly perfect. How can someone like Tom even want him here?

Before his nerves can start spinning out in an attempt to answer that question, Dean's phone buzzes in his pocket. He fishes it out to see a text from Sam. "Please text to confirm that you are still alive and have a plan to get back to the motel so that we can hunt monsters the monster we came here to hunt."

Dean scoffs, then looks around the house again, trying figure out what lie he should tell about where he is before he decides it's easier to just mostly tell the truth. "I'm still alive, and I will not be back to the

motel until the morning." He adds a winking emoji and sends it.

Sam replies with an eyeroll emoji and the phrase "Spare me the details."

"Everything okay?" Tom asks as he sets two glasses of wine down on an end table and settles back on the couch. In front of him, the fire place is starting to crackle to life.

"Peachy," Dean answers.

Laying on the rug is like lying on a cloud. Dean could sleep on this rug. Dean could wrap it around himself and live in this rug.

He's about to get fucked on this rug.

In front of the fire place. With a favorite record spinning quietly in the background.

Tom presses a kiss to the side of Dean's knee and grins at him. He's a gorgeous fucking mess. Cheeks flush from the wine, a patina of sweat across his forehead from the fire and the exertion, lips red and wet from working over Dean's cock.

"Almost, baby," Tom pants. "Almost ready."

Dean groans and lets his head drop back against the pillow underneath it.

Tom had gotten him a pillow.

Dean had only let Tom win at pool to be charming. He knew Tom wouldn't actually take the terms of the bet seriously, and Dean, despite the little spark of interest he'd felt during the game, had fully expected himself to decline any offer to go further than they had last time. Hands and mouths and laughing and a late night snack run. But the absurd romance, the over-the-top perfection had gotten to him. Tom's mouth against his, Tom's strong, callused hands wandering across Dean's scarred and battered body, and the way, just like last time, Tom has seemed excited at the prospect of being his first, had made a lot of his reservations melt away.

And then there was the memory of last time. It was something Dean held onto so hard. It was something that no one could take away from him. And everything about this was even better than last time.

He wanted something perfect. And here was this handsome guy, in his beautiful house who wanted to give it to him. Dean wanted this. A stupidly perfect first time. Better than his first time with a girl, upright behind one of the out buildings at one of the other schools he'd only been in for a couple months. Afterward she'd just pulled her panties back up and her skirt down and asked him for a cigarette, then rolled her eyes at him when he didn't have one.

Tom had been working him open gently for the last twenty minutes. Sucking Dean's cock and working his fingers against muscles and nerves that had reacted in strange new ways and sparked strange new pleasures through Dean's entire body.

"Please, please just do it," Dean whines. "I can't take it anymore, please."

"You sure?" Tom asks.

"Yes," Dean gasps. "Yes, I'm sure."

Tom's infinite patience finally breaks. Instead of the small, controlled movements that have been sending shockwaves through Dean, for a moment everything is furious and rushed. Tom seizes the lube and a condom from the box he'd surreptitiously carried down before, tears the package open, rolls it on, slicks himself, catches Dean's legs under the knee and hauls him closer, then sets his cock against Dean's body before he freezes.

"Okay, " Tom gulps. "Okay. Take a breath, relax, stop me if you need to."

"Okay."

The moment of mania is over. Tom pushes forward with perfect control and Dean forces himself to relax after a sudden flash of panic at the first feeling of movement into his body. It's a lot. He knew it would be, Tom is not small, but he couldn't have imagined this feeling. The pressure, the buzz of pleasure and nervousness and just a touch of pain, hovering out at the edge of everything else, not important, not distracting, but present in a way that's grounding. The noise Tom makes when he finally bottoms out is almost like a bark, and Dean laughs out loud at him.

"Still okay?"

"Yeah," Dean answers. Tom cups his face, brushing a thumb over his

cheek and, despite the heat of the fire, Dean shivers. “Yeah, I’m good, you can… ummm.”

“In a second,” Tom answers breathlessly. Dean wonders for a second if Tom is trying to calm down, or if there’s something he’s supposed to be doing during this interlude. He’s suddenly very aware of his hands lying limp at his sides.

Then Tom starts to move, and any other thoughts disappear.

Afterward, they lay on the rug for what feels like a long time, running their fingers over each other’s skin and not talking, until finally Tom yawns and says he doesn’t want to sleep on the floor. He stands, pulls Dean up and walks him, not to the spiral staircase that leads up to the bedroom, but back past the the tucked under living room, to the bathroom. He turns on the shower and pulls Dean in after him.

Dean retrieves his boxers and tee shirt from the front of the house, slips them on and joins Tom in the loft, where he’s already under a thick blue and white striped duvet. He flicks the light off as soon as Dean has folded himself under the covers, but the embers from the fireplace downstairs cast just enough warm light upward that, once his eyes adjust to the dark, Dean can still make out Tom’s features.

“I’m really glad you called,” Tom whispers.

“Me too. I uh… I’m not going to be in town very long, though.”

“Yeah. I figured,” Tom said with a sigh. “It’s still nice to see you. Things around here have been… I don’t know. Not really what I was expecting when I moved back. I… didn’t expect to join the family business. Construction. Didn’t expect to stay, I think.”

“Yeah. I get that.”

There’s a long pause. Dean almost thinks Tom has fallen asleep until he hears a soft. “Oh. That’s right. You were… working with your father last time I saw you, weren’t you. Do you still do that?”

“Umm… he died,” Dean says. “A couple months back. My brother and I are doing the work now.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t… it’s really complicated. I… I don’t really know what to say about it.”

“I get that too.” Tom’s hand finds Dean’s under the pillow. He squeezes tight before he grip slowly loosens. Dean falls asleep before either of them let go.

In the morning, Tom makes waffles and coffee and conversation is light and easy again as they have breakfast. Tom assures Dean that he can deal with picking his car up from the bar later, it’s not a big deal. They kiss goodbye at the back door.

“Hey, Dean?” Tom says as Dean opens the door to the Impala. “I know this is a one time thing… but you have my number.”

“Yeah. I do,” Dean replies. “And… I never know where work is going to take me.”

Tom grins, waves good bye, and closes the door.

Chapter 6: You Know There's a Word For That, Right?

Chapter by oncethrown

[image] oncethrown

Sam tosses Dean's phone at him before Dean even has time to set the pizza box down. Dean catches it one handed, but the pizza nearly takes a tumble and Dean fixes Sam with a reproachful glare.

"You can't just read it to me like a normal human?"

"You grabbed my phone by accident," Sam informs him. "Oh, and you got a inch of texts from that girl in Oregon."

Dean drops the pizza on the table where Sam is sitting with his lap top. "Girl from Oregon?" He asks before he opens his texts and sees "Carthage". His chest bursts, a feeling like a very cold knife has sliced through his sternum and cracked it open. He covers by making a production of hanging his coat up in the closet. He scrolls up a little ways, scanning for anything that could give away the fact that "Carthage" is very much not a girl from Oregon.

But there's nothing. A slightly flirty text that mentions that Carthage just wrapped a big project at their house, then a shot of an empty jacuzzi, steam rising off the water against a back drop of at least a foot of snow, followed by a text that Carthage wishes Dean was in Oregon right about now.

Dean opens the pizza box, pulls out a slice and stares at the photo for a few seconds.

Dean is on the southern border of Washington state right now. Maybe 70 miles away.

He clears his throat. "Oh…. Right. Oregon," He says a little too loud. A little too fake to his own ears. He eats half the pizza slice in one bite.

“Must have left quite an impression,” Sam says with a laugh.

Dean chews.
He and Sam have basically wrapped the case they were on. There isn’t anything pressing to do in the morning.

Check out’s not until one.

He texts back.

I could be there in an hour.

The reply back is immediate. I’ll be waiting with a smile (and nothing else)

The only thing stopping him is thinking of an excuse that Sam will buy.

He finishes his pizza slice. Clears his throat.

“Yeah, I’m gonna go.”

He stands up, wipes his hands on his jeans and starts growing his things in his duffle.

“Wait, seriously?” Sam demands. “You’re going to drive 70 miles, in the snow, just to get laid?”

“Yup,” Dean answers. “Everything has been hell bullshit lately, we all done here, there will just be more monsters tomorrow. I’m going to go have sex in a hot tub.”

He zips his duffle with finality, and moves to the closet to pull out his coat.

“Dean-”

“Sammy, look on the bright side-the room is all yours. You can watch a documentary. Eat hummus. Whatever you do when I’m not here, maybe, even go get a girl yourself. You’ve gone longer than I have without, you know, a release. Bad for the brain.”

He throws on his coat and drops his phone in his pocket. Sam is staring at him, flabbergasted enough to make a trickle of anxiety squirm down Dean’s back. “What?”

“Wait, do you like this girl?”

Dean shrugs. “Yeah, well enough. What do you want from me? I’m in a months long dry spell and just got offered a big old drink.”

“The sex can’t possibly be good enough to drive that far for.”

This is more comfortable territory at least. Dean slaps on his most obnoxious grin. “Oh, Sammy, you would not believe how good the sex was.”

Dean’s already hard in the car, and trying to focus even harder on the road. The snow isn’t that bad, even for Oregon, but this road was also not built for going ninety.

He keeps thinking about the look on Sam’s face when he’d asked, “Wait, do you like this girl?”

Obviously the answer is no. It has to be no. Tom is just the perfect intersection of secrets. No one in Dean’s real life, the one full of monsters and terrors and violence and impossible choices, is ever going to find out about Tom, and Tom is never going to find out that there is a world beyond his warm home and big family.

It’s a perfect arrangement, and Dean knows that means it can’t last.

Which is exactly why he’s driving so fucking fast. He’s not going to have that many of these warm, easy nights with Tom. He’s got to take advantage of them while he can.

The snow is getting deeper the closer he gets to Carthage, deep enough where he’s not sure he’s going to make it up the graveled switch back drive way between Tom’s house and the road. He gets stuck about halfway up, but it only takes a little bit of working back and forth before the wheels grip and he makes it the rest of the way up.

Tom’s waiting for him at the door with a big grin across his face. “Shit,” he laughs. “I thought I had enough time to-“

Dean cuts him off with a kiss, wrapping an arm around Tom’s back as soon as Tom kisses him back, and pulling him close. “Can whatever it was wait until after you fuck me?”

Tom coughs, but nods. “Yes. Yes it can.” The shock falls off his face and his expression and voice go warm. “It sure as hell can.”

Dean kisses him again, and after moment Tom breaks away, catches Dean's hand as he turns and walks him upstairs.

Dean sprawls back against Tom's ludicrously nice mattress and even nicer pillows. Everything smells faintly of laundry detergent and Dean's body feels more liquid than solid as Tom pulls out, folds Dean's legs back together and gently pushes Dean onto his right side before curling up around him with a sigh.

"So," Tom laughs. "I take it you needed that?"

A sound more like another groan than a laugh pours out of Dean. "Uh, yeah, you could say that. That was so, so worth driving down from Washington for."

"You made it down here from Washington in forty five minutes? Even if you were sitting on the border that's an hour-ten drive."

"I was motivated," Dean replies with a laugh. Tom echoes and pulls himself even closer, squeezing Dean around the middle before rolling away to deal with the condom. Dean hears him groan, then feels the impact as Tom flops back against the pillows. A light touch across his shoulder butts up against the haze of afterglow. Then another, and then a soft caress downward past the scapula, horizontal across his ribs.

Oh. Shit.

Dean's eyes snap open, and he forces himself not to move as Tom's fingers continue to gently brush down the length of the scar. That's a nasty one. Kitchen knife thrown across the room by a ghost. The cut had been deep and jagged, and the stitches had been jagged and irregular because he'd had to stitch it up himself in a mirror back at the motel. Plus it's nearly a straight line to the bullet wound on Dean's arm. That one had been a wake up call. Not a monster, not a demon, just some jack ass in the parking lot of a shitty bar. Dean had been… what… twenty three? Maybe twenty two?

Tom's hand crosses from Dean's back to the back of his arm. He sets his fingertip in the divot in the skin and Dean flinches involuntarily. There aren't any nerves in good working order in that spot anymore, but there's a phantom pain sometimes. You don't really forget how much it hurts to get shot.

“Sorry,” Tom hisses. “I’m sorry. That was really rude.”

He braces himself for the bewildered, pitying look he’s seen before, and rolls over, fixing Tom with a small, forced smile. “No. It’s okay.” He bites back his instinct to follow that with just a hunting accident. He hasn’t actually had to lie to Tom yet. And as much as he doesn’t want to tell Tom the truth about his life or his job or what’s really out there… he doesn’t like the idea of looking this guy in the eye and telling him something that is officially untrue.

Tom’s face shadows for a moment, he bites his lip, but whatever he was going to say passes. “Still. I’m sorry.”

Dean rolls the rest of the way over, throwing an arm around Tom’s stomach. “It’s fine.”

They lay there a little longer, until Tom reminds him that he had initially been lured there to get in the jacuzzi.

“Fuck. Who would have thought that apple slices would be good with sausage and a cracker?” Dean asked, washing his cracker down with a gulp of wine before sinking further down in the hot tub, letting the water bubbling from the jets tickle his chin.

Tom laughs, and readjusts his legs across Dean’s lap. “Yes. I put together a mean fancy snack plate.”

“You do. This is delicious. What are these?” He points to something that looks like a bite sized green burrito.

“Stuffed grape leaves,” Tom answers. “Usually I tell guys that I made them, but I’ll let you in on a secret: I get them at the deli.”

“You bring a lot of guys up here for cheese and apples?” Dean asks, throwing a couple cashews into his mouth.

Tom bites his lip. “I’m sorry. That was an asshole move. Tonight’s all about you.”

“It’s okay,” Dean says, surprised when he realizes he means it. “My feelings won’t be hurt if you’ve slept with another guy since I saw you… what, seven months ago? Hell, my feelings won’t be hurt if I’m the third guy you sent that hot tub pic to tonight.”

Tom rolls his eyes and takes a gulp from his wine glass. “You’re the

only guy I sent that hot tub picture to. I was in town today to pick up something from a bartender at that bar where you hustled those red necks. I was thinking about you."

Dean nods and grabs another cracker.

"But… no. You aren't the only guy I've brought up here in the last few months." Tom brushes Dean's hair back from his face. "But you're the guy I enjoy spoiling."

Dean shoots him a grin, grabs the winebottle out of the snow and tops up his glass.

"What about you?" Tom asks, trying for unworried and missing by a mile.

"What about me?" Dean asks, full of false innocence.

"Asshole."

"Fine. Yeah. No. I picked a girl up in a bar a couple months ago. Things have been too busy to really focus on anything but work."

Tom looks surprised by this. "A girl?"

Dean bites his lip, drinks his wine. "Yeah." He lets that sit for a moment, not sure how to say more. "Umm… I… my brother and I are always on the road together. We basically live in each other's pockets. I can't exactly pick up a guy at a bar with my little brother in the booth."

"So… wait… do you do it so he sees you or because you actually like girls?"

"Yeah. I like girls," Dean says. It sounds so weird to say out loud. The fact that he's naked, with the naked guy he just had sex with mostly on his lap makes it even weirder. He knows it's true, but someone he doesn't feel like he's making it sound true. "You are… umm. You are the only…. You know. Dude. Ever," Dean continues.

Tom takes one slow sip then another. "Okay. So…you sleep with women because your brother is around, and you drove here like a bat out of hell for me to fuck you."

Dean picks up on the undertone of that question. It's something he's been coming back to a lot himself, after a vivid dream, or when his

mind wanders behind the wheel. “It’s not like that. I’m not… look, I like women. I love women, I love having sex with women… I just,” his throat tightens here. He’s thought it to himself. He wouldn’t have driven this far to see Tom if part of him couldn’t know this was true about him. “I get the same thing from dudes. Or I would, if… I had ever had an opportunity with anyone besides you. I think.”

“Oh. Okay,” Tom scratches his head. “You know there’s a word for that, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what the word is,” Dean huffs.

“Sorry,” Tom says. “I’m not trying to… interrogate you or anything I just… can I ask you one more thing?”

Dean nods.

“Does your brother know you’re here?” Tom asks.

Dean lets his head fall back. He’s very aware of how easy it would be to massage the truth here. Sam is well aware that Dean is in Carthage, Oregon. He knows that Dean drove down here to get laid. Those things are both answers to Tom’s literal question, and they are both totally and completely true.

And they are not what Tom means.

“He knows I sped down to Carthage. I let him think I’ve got a girl here,” Dean answers.

Tom sets his hand palm to Dean’s shoulder, and pets over it. “He… he wouldn’t hurt you if he knew you were here with me, right?”

“What? No,” Dean replies, his shock taking over, forcing the answer out of him before he can more reasonably reflect that Tom is smart enough to realize that Dean has been shady about what exactly he does for work, and has seen him naked and touched enough of his scars to make some assumptions about Dean’s life. Hell, his palm is settled over another knife wound now. “It’s not like that. Even with my Dad… he… probably wouldn’t….” Dean clears his throat. That’s not a rabbit hole he’s going down with a guy who just fucked him sitting in his lap. No way.

“Sammy’s a good guy. He… Jesus. I don’t know. He probably wouldn’t care at all.”

“You just don’t want him to know that you like guys?”

“No. I don’t.”

Tom seems like he’s about to say something else. He opens his mouth but shakes his head. Droplets of melted snow shake off of him.
“Okay.” He sighs, moves closer to Dean and catches Dean’s chin in his palm, turning him into a kiss. “I’m starving. Wanna put in a pizza?”

They open another bottle of wine and Tom leaves Dean in the living room to find something to watch while he pulls the pizza out of the oven.

Dean flips through channels, wondering a little bit what a life like this would be like. Tom had told Dean that he worked late on Friday, had leftovers for dinner and gone to bed early. Saturday he had gotten up earlier than usual, cleaned the house, brought some wood in from outside, run errands, remembered Dean, sent him a picture and then scrambled to get things ready for Dean to come and mix-up his usual weekend. Tomorrow, after Dean left, Tom was going to plow out his driveway, make something in the crock pot that he could have for lunch all week, and then go to bed early again so he could get up for an early meeting on Monday.

In the last month Dean and Sam had worked cases in Mississippi, Montana, New Mexico, and Washington. He had literally no clue where they might drive to tomorrow after he picked Sam up. He didn’t know where they were going to sleep, he didn’t know where they were going to eat, what they were going to hunt. Nothing. And really, when he thought about it, that was okay. That was his life and he did love it most of the time. He was proud of what he’d done. He was proud of what he was capable of. And besides. The grass is always greener.

He flips way way up into the channels Tom has available, wondering how anyone could possibly choose something to watch with so many options available. Tom comes back to the living room with two plates, a couple paper towels, and a carefully sliced up pizza, and sets them all on the coffee table. Dean changes the channel again, and stops.

“Oh!” He says. “This. We gotta watch this.”

Tom laughs. “Scooby Doo? Really?”

“I love this show, man. I’ve seen every episode like a hundred times.

This is the pinnacle of animated television."

"I never really got into it," Tom admits, taking a huge bite of pizza.

"How is that even possible?"

Tom shrugs. "I was a high strung kid. Anything even slightly scary would just ruin me for weeks. I'd try to go sleep in my brother's bed, and he'd kick me out and I'd try to sleep with my parents, and they'd try to send me back to my room and I'd cry. Eventually I just wasn't allowed to watch anything like… set at night. No monsters, no jump cuts, no dissonant violins. Nothing."

Dean forces a slightly strained chuckle. "That was uh… not my Dad's philosophy. At all."

Tom shrugs and leans back against Dean's body, tucking himself under Dean's arm. "I think I can handle Scooby Doo. If you promise you'll protect me from monsters?"

Dean fights off the feeling of both of his lungs exploding in his chest. He brushes his lips over Tom's hairline.

"I've been protecting you from monsters all night."

Tom makes breakfast again in the morning. Omelettes and Texas toast and a little bit of microwaved pot roast on the side. The snow outside has made everything clean and silent. It's so beautiful, Dean almost doesn't want to disturb it. But Tom's right, if they don't tackle it right away, they'll never leave. Dean shovels the stairs and the patio while Tom runs his truck, a big sturdy plow affixed to the front, up and down the switch back.

Inside, they try to kiss goodbye, they had slept late and taken a leisurely breakfast and Dean only had an hour before he was supposed to back in Washington to pick Sam up before check out.

But they keep kissing, Dean loving the feeling of the cold tip of Tom's nose against his own warm cheeks. Tom unbuttons Dean's shirt and they wind up back up in the loft again, topping off the tryst with the closest they've ever come to a quickie before getting dressed and actually kissing good bye this time.

"Hey, Dean," Tom says as Dean buttons up his jacket and sets his hand to the doorknob.

“Yeah?”

“Keep in touch, okay?”

“I will.”

Chapter 7: Out of the Fire

Chapter by oncethrown

[image] oncethrown

They do keep in touch, though it's not really a regular thing. Tom will text Dean to blow off steam about a guy at work. Dean will text Tom about some nerdy thing Sam just did.

On a particularly exciting night, Tom texts Dean while he's alone in the car after picking up dinner.

"What are you wearing?"

Dean pulls over on the next dark stretch of road and Replies "well now it's nothing."

Sam gripes when Dean gets back half an hour later than promised with cold food, but it was worth it.

Dean assumes, in the stretches when he doesn't hear from Tom, that he's dating. Or that Dean isn't the only itinerant bad boy Tom "keeps in touch" with.

Sometimes, when he and Sam are driving far enough west, or the beds in the motel are particularly awful, Dean catches himself fantasizing about what it might be like to have those precious weekends in a home with Tom be more than they are.

He pictures himself in the kitchen, or at the grill in the backyard. Curled up on the couch under the loft, coaxing Tom through a horror movie.

He doesn't let it get past that. It's too ridiculous. He and Sam have to stop the yellow eyed demon. They'll probably die doing it. And even if they don't, What the hell would Dean even say?

"Thanks for saving the world with me, Sammy. I'm gonna move to Oregon, don't ask why, and see you never."

No.

Besides. Things with Tom aren't even like that. They text once a month. They had sex a handful of times over a handful of years, they were briefly friends in school.

No.

So they hunt. And they drive.

A couple months pass between Dean selling his soul and the next time Tom texts him. It's not a deep or meaningful text. It's about a silly work thing. Tom just wants some one totally impartial to agree with him that his boss is being an asshole about something.

Dean stares down at the text and for a moment, considers deleting Tom from his contacts all together. Tom is a good person. He's sweet and caring and makes good omelettes and was afraid of Scooby Doo villains as a child and he would never sell his soul. He's not marked down for a room in Hell.

And it's not like they're in love or anything. Dean's doesn't entertain any illusions about that. They have a casual thing. It's warm and caring, and it's important to Dean, but it's still casual.

Dean doesn't delete the contact. But he also takes a day to reply.

Dean only gets a couple more messages from Tom before his contract runs up, and a Hell Hound chases him down.

It takes a lot of time, and a few cuts and splashes of holy water before Bobby believes that it's really Dean. In the flesh. It's a little easier to convince him that they've gotta go see Sam right away. Bobby gives Dean back the few things of Dean's that he has in the house. His necklace, his jacket. As they are about to leave, Bobby heads back into the house for something he forgot and reemerges with a charger and Dean's cell phone.

"Thanks, Bobby," Dean says, taking both from him and shoving them into his jacket pocket.

“You uh…” Bobby starts, then clears his throat. “You may want to let a fella by the name of Tom know that you’re alright.”

Dean goes cold. “What? A dead man doesn’t have any privacy?” He snaps.

“I didn’t mean to snoop. I kept the phone live in case… hell, I don’t know. We were a little desperate for leads. He sent you a couple messages.”

Dean flips open the phone. Sure enough, Tom’s one of the most recent people to text. When he opens their messages the first one is an innocuous message about watching Scooby Doo with his nephew, from before Dean became Hell Hound chow, a message from two months ago that makes it very very clear exactly how Dean and Tom know each other, and then, from about a month ago, a quick message just expressing the hope that Dean is happy and okay. Not to mention few months of easy flirting… and one instance of sexting.

“We… can talk about that,” Bobby says. “We don’t have to.”

Dean clears his throat and jams the phone back in his pocket. “Does Sam know?”

“No.”

“Then this is all the talking about this we’re ever going to do. Talking about this ends right here.”

Bobby just nods.

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Chapter 8: Revelation All Around

Chapter by oncethrown

He doesn't get texts from Tom anymore. And honestly? He's relieved. After the things he's done he doesn't deserve to have someone like Tom in his life. He's not going to go back to Oregon and be a drunken mess and wake up to Tom shaking him because he was screaming after yet another nightmare about hell and Alaistar. Tom should be with a normal guy. Hell, maybe the reason that he stopped texting is that he is with a normal guy now.

That would be best. Tom should be happy and Dean should suffer for his sins.

And he believes that… until Anna comes along. She knows, and she kisses him anyway. She knows, and she walks him back out to the Impala anyway.

Dean stops as they are undressing and admits that it's been a while since he, uh… pitched.

She knows that too, and she wraps her legs around him and pulls him inside her anyway.

It's the closest thing he's ever felt to forgiveness.

Dean still thinks about those weekends in Oregon sometimes, but less and less. It's kinda hard to find the time to worry too much about how the life of some guy you've slept with a couple times is going okay when you are running around the midwest desperately trying to stop a crazed demon zealot from breaking enough seals to free Lucifer from Hell.

"You sure we shouldn't ask someone else to take this case?" Sam asks as they pull up to the hotel in Austin. "I mean… we are still no where near finding Lilith and this is clearly just a run of the mill haunting. Anyone could get this done."

"I wanna work, Sam," Dean says with as much finality as he can muster. "Heaven, hell, douchebag angels turning up all the time to sneer at us and give us orders and say creepy shit. It's getting to me. I

just want to go in, work a case, salt and burn some bones and help people."

"We could help a lot more people by stopping the apocalypse," Sam counters.

"Look, man. We're working on it. We aren't there yet, but Bobby's on it, hopefully the stupid angels are on it. We're doing what we can to save everyone, but I just… four people have died in this hotel in the last two months. Let's go stop that from happening to anyone else."

Sam shakes his head and opens his mouth to disagree.

"Also— ALSO— this place has room service. HBO. Espresso bar for you. Mattress that fewer people have died on or turned tricks on than where we usually stay. You could even go down to the gym. Or the pool. Swim some laps. Come on, you know we need an apocalypse break."

Sam turns and starts walking toward the hotel entrance. "Do you mean any of those things or are you just excited for a hotel bar?"

"Well. I'm not going to turn down an opportunity for a whiskey in the hot tub," Dean says as he follows Sam into the lobby.

The woman behind the register reminds him of Anna. Sharp features and big eyes. Long blonde hair instead of red.

"Hey there," Dean greets her. "Agent Antilles, this is my partner Agent Wexley. We will be needing a room on the sixth floor."

Her eyes go even bigger. "Oh. Um… the… right. Okay. We don't have any rooms… like for the whole week." Her thick Texas accent winds around her stilted words.

"Well, that's fine," Sam says. We'll take a room on another floor."

"We don't… all our rooms are full. For like the whole entire hotel. Cause… the conference." She knots her hands together in front of her chest and starts to knead her knuckles.

"You know, this is an important federal investigation. Could we talk to your manager?"

"I am the manager," she said with a sigh of defeat. "Um… since yesterday. Donna got killed, and then Maria quit, and then Darnell

said he'd come in today, but he never showed up. So I said, you know… double my salary and I'll do it. Wish I hadn't… but…" she shrugs.

Dean leans over the counter. "Did your boss send you in to work today… alone and defenseless, after four murders."

She holds her hands up at chest height then slowly reaches for something under the counter and daintily pulls a ridiculously oversized handgun up just high enough for them to see.

"Seriously?" Sam asks.

"It's Texas," she says with a shrug.

"There's no way your grip fits that thing," Dean says. "And I bet it didn't fit the grip of the insecure douche-bag who gave it to you. What was your name?"

"Terra."

"Terra." Dean unholsters his own gun sets it on the counter and pushes it over. "Here."

Sam clears his throat. "Agent? Do you think that's the b—"

But Terra takes the gun and slides her own monstrosity over.

"So… how about that room?" Dean asks, giving her his smarmiest smile.

"We really don't have any rooms… except… for… those rooms."

"Those…oh. The rooms where people died."

Terra nods.

"Alright. Let's get the keys."

There is a big, unambiguous stain right in the middle of hotel room. Dean stares down at it for a while before digging his EMF meter out of his duffle and flicking it on.

It screams.

One long piercing shriek that punches into Dean's ear drums like a fist before he can flick the EMF meter back off.

"Have you ever heard an EMF meter do that?" Dean demands.

Sam shakes his head. "No. No I haven't."

"What the fuck do you suppose that means?"

"Nothing good. We can't be looking at just one ghost… I mean…"

"Ghosts on ghosts. Ghosts all the way down," Dean sighs.

"Haunted objects, curses, maybe witches using ghosts."

"And ghosts, ghosts, ghosts." Dean tosses the EMF meter back on the bed. "This was supposed to be a fucking milk run."

"Alright. Well. We better start canvasing."

The first three guys who answer the door after Dean knocks raise eyebrows at him for being an FBI agent who wants to know about flickering lights or cold spots. Dean is starting to wonder if it might be worth it to go find a janitor's closet and steal an extra uniform in order to get better information out of people, but the potential of that idea dries up when the next two guys sneer at him for not seeming to have a clear idea of how the electrical fritzes might be part of the crime, and get technical on him in a weirdly aggressive way. Room 625 all but slams the door on him. Dean takes a breath, tells himself that the guy is just some asshole who thinks thumping something makes it work again, and knocks on the next door, flipping his badge open when he hears footsteps inside the room.

"Good afternoon, I'm Agent Antilles, " He starts to say as the door opens and he brings his badge up to eye height, "Just wanted…"

He trails off when he realizes that he's face to face with Tom. Who is not in Carthage, Oregon, but is very much right in front of him.

After a pause that feels endless, Dean hears himself auto pilot forward. "To ask you a few questions."

Tom stares at him. Dean stares back.

"Why don't you come in," Tom says.

Dean is several steps inside the hotel room before he realizes that he is still holding his badge and ID up at shoulder height. He doesn't resist when Tom slowly reaches out and plucks it out of his hand.

Tom examines it carefully before looking up at Dean with a closed off expression. "Agent Dean Antilles?" He asks, then places his thumb nail against the edge of the photo. "Do people really fall for this? The picture's glued on. And I saw the Impala out front. Fed's drive SUV's. Not classic cars."

Dean clears his throat and snatches the badge back. "Okay… Okay… Look, I can explain all of this."

Tom looks skeptical, but shakes his head and turns down the hall, waving for Dean to follow after him. "Alright. Let's start at the beginning then."

Dean follows him down the little entry hallway and into the main part of the hotel room, leading tea into the hugest, fanciest suite he's ever seen. There's a glass encased gas fireplace in the center of a big modern main room with huge, squared off leather furniture. Off past the main room, Dean can see glass French doors, and through them, a king sized bed covered in pillows.

Tom grabs a carry on suit case leaning against the wall by the handle and hauls it up onto the couch before unzipping it and pulling out a bottle of Johnny Walker Black.

"I am ready for that explanation whenever you are," Tom says as he walks to the desk on one side of the room and unwraps two tumblers. He doles out two short pours then comes back to Dean and hands him a glass.

Dean takes it. "There's something happening in this hotel, okay? Four people have been torn apart, in their hotel rooms, and it's all happened on this floor and it is going to happen again."

"Okay. Four gruesome murders… no news coverage. The hotel never contacted my company. No one was offered refund. There are no police, no crime scene investigators… not even any yellow tape. Just you with a fake badge knocking on doors. Why should I believe you?"

Dean stares down into the amber liquid for a moment, before quietly replying, "Because I haven't told you everything, but I've never lied to you, and I… you have to know I don't want you to get hurt."

“I believe that you haven’t lied to me before… but you’re clearly lying about something now. And I haven’t heard shit from you in almost a year, Dean. Why should I think it matters to you if you lie to me now?”

“I wanted to text you, okay? I wanted to see you, but I couldn’t. It’s not that I didn’t want to, it’s not like there was someone else… I literally had no access to any way to get a hold of you for…like four or five of those months and after that… I didn’t think you would want to hear from me.”

“Well.” Tom takes a drink of his whiskey. “I did want to hear from you. I was worried about you. I did a couple searches for your obituary, Dean.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Where were you?”

“I… look, there are parts of my life that I don’t… share—“

“Why?”

“Because you’re not going to believe me, and it’s not important. What’s important is that you can’t stay on this floor, you shouldn’t stay in this hotel and I’ll…” Dean reaches into his pocket, pulling out the wad of cash he’d managed to acquire a couple weeks ago when a dropped debit card and a lucky guess at an ATM pin code had resulted in a pretty solid windfall. “Here. I’ll pay for you to go find another hotel. A safe one.”

Tom waves the money away. “How are you the only person who knows about four gruesome deaths in this hotel?”

“It only made the local news,” Dean answers. “And my brother and I we… look out for that sort of thing. Come on, will you take the money?”

“I don’t need the money, Dean,” Tom replies. “I want answers. Where have you been? Why are you here, why am I in danger?”

“I don’t…” Dean starts. “I’m trying to protect you. I want you to be safe and I don’t want you to know what’s really out there.’

“Tell me the truth and I’ll go to another hotel,” Tom says.

Dean takes a deep breath. Telling Tom the truth and then immediately having to abandon him to mull over the new horror alone is exactly how he dreaded he might have to do this.

But he'll do anything it takes to keep Tom safe.

"Fine. The truth? I've been hunting ghosts and demons and monsters since I was four. My father took us to Carthage to hunt what turned out to be a weirdo librarian's weird zombie-slave making power trip, and I disappeared after what I did to you that afternoon because when I got back to the motel my family was staying in my father had killed all the zombies and the librarian and we had to get out of dodge. My brother and I still hunt ghosts and demons and monsters, and every year it gets weirder and for the last few months its been getting bloodier and more fucked up and now this hotel is bursting with more weird ghost energy than I've ever seen and I know things are going to get worse because that's just how my life goes."

"Ghosts," Tom says. He chuckles and Dean's heart falls into his stomach. "Ghosts," Tom repeats. "I asked you to tell me the truth and you came up with ghosts?"

Dean stares at Tom. Tom's skeptical smile starts to fade away as Dean fumes, as though he can change Tom's mind with nothing but intensely directed fury. "Well, you know what? It doesn't matter if you believe me or not. Cause I'm not going to let you die. I don't care if Sam and I have to follow you around the whole time you're hear, or if we have to tie you up and throw you in the trunk until we've figured out what's going on in this hotel."

Tom, goddamn him, doesn't look the least bit convinced. "And what are you going to say to your brother to make him kidnap or stalk me? What are you going to say about how you know me, and why I'm so damn important to you?"

Dean opens his mouth, bites his tongue, and then realizes that he really means what he's about to say. "I'll tell him the truth. If that's what it takes to keep you from being a big red stain on this ugly fucking carpet, I'll go back to my room and I'll tell Sam that you're who I go see when I'm in Carthage," Dean huffs. "You asshole."

Tom's jaw slowly drops at Dean talks. When Dean finishes, Tom stares at him for several moments, then tosses back the rest of his whiskey. "Okay. Okay… I believe that you think you're telling me the truth and I'm not going to force you to tell Sam… I… ghosts, demons, monsters?

How am I supposed to believe that, Dean?"

An idea occurs to Dean. Not one he's excited about.

"Okay, I can't prove ghosts… but maybe just… general weirdness. I'm gonna take off my shirt."

"What?" Tom asks, taking a step back. "Why?"

Dean sets his glass down on the desk and starts undoing the buttons of his jacket. "I don't have proof of ghosts, but I can at least prove that something really fucking weird is going on, okay?"

He takes his jacket off, folds it once in half and lays it over the back of the couch, then does the same thing with his white button up, and finally with his tee shirt. He points to the hand mark burned into his shoulder. "Weird enough for you?"

Tom purses his lips. "I don't think that's weird enough to be proof that the world is full of monsters, Dean."

"Okay," Dean huffs and turns his back to Tom. "How about the fact that all of my scars are gone?"

Tom goes quiet, but Dean is aware of him moving closer. He sets his hand to Dean's back, where the jagged knife scar used to be. Then to Dean's arm, where the gunshot wound was. Dean hold still as Tom's fingers brush over several more spots on his back, scars he doesn't even remember.

"Oh," Tom finally whispers. "Oh, fuck."

Chapter 9: Close Your Eyes

Chapter by oncethrown

[image] oncethrown

Dean puts his shirt back on, makes sure that Tom has his current phone number, gives Tom his hotel room number, tells Tom that if his room suddenly gets cold, or if the lights start fritzing he needs to run to that room immediately.

Tom is quiet for a moment. "And if your brother answers the door, what am I supposed to tell him?"

"Tell him I know you and told you to go there."

Tom rubs at the heavy watch around his wrist. "You know that's not what I meant."

"I'll deal with whatever you tell him," Dean says with a sigh. "The important thing is that you're safe."

"But…you want me to lie," Tom finally says.

Dean sighs. He's on a case, he's trying to save people, these two worlds were never supposed to meet and he's spent too much time with Tom

that should have been spent canvassing and researching.

"Yeah. I do," Dean sighs. "I just… The part of my life that you can be in is… small. And it's separate from this part of my life full of monsters and death. And I just… I know that I'm not going to make it to an old age full of omlettes and clearing snow and watching Scooby Doo. That's not the direction my life is going to go. I've made my peace with that and it's… not worth pretending that it could if I just… faced things that it's easier not to face."

Tom watches him for a for moments. "What direction is your life going to go in, Dean?"

"I have to save the world," Dean tells him heavily. When he looks up, Tom's frozen face is just starting to twitch into a smile, but stops, freezes again, then starts to droop.

"I won't tell Sam anything."

And then, to Dean's absolute shock, Tom moves forward, and hugs him tight.

It takes them too long to work the case. Too long to find the magic barriers keeping the ghosts on the sixth floor, too long to make contact with the spirit of the most recently deceased.

And too long to figure out that the only creature who could keep that many spirits in one place is a reaper.

A distraught reaper trying to summon death, or god, or anyone who might listen to thousands of cries of pain.

But the only people who hear those cries are the Winchesters.

And by the time they do hear them, by the time they do figure out the plan, the only thing they have time to do is run.

There's no time for Dean to explain why he knows that everyone is going to be at the keystone speech for the conferences opening, he just runs, with Sam behind him, and they burst into the room screaming that there's a bomb.

That always works. People always panic. It's the one threat that always seems to get into that perfect crux of what people's worst fear is and what people will actually believe is happening.

Chairs topple as people shoot to their feet. They run for the doors.

Dean sees Tom in the middle of the crowd, and his already thrumming heart cranks up to a punishing, shrieking pace when Tom runs— not out the doors with the others, not toward the exit sign at the back of the room, but straight toward Dean.

The reaper appears between them, arms outstretched toward Tom, only moments away from moving his spirit from the land of the living into a hellish nightmare. Turning him from a sweet guy who laughs at easy jokes and watches cartoons with his nieces and nephews and kisses Dean like maybe he needs someone to be gentle with him sometimes into just another screaming spirit.

Dean hurtles forward, knowing there won't be time to stop him, but running all out.

And then he sees Castiel, materializing in the reaper's path. The sudden appearance throws Tom off, he slides to the left, falling and rolling. Dean runs to him, throws himself and Tom and hurls him back toward the grind just as he hears Cas's low growl "Close your eyes!"

Dean clenches his eyes shut and slams his hand over Tom's, waiting for the burn of heavenly light to subside.

When it does, Dean looks up. Cas is facing a reaper, who looks like some skinny young man, with tears streaming down his face.

"Where are they?" The reaper screams. "Lucifer rises. War and Famine and Pestilence ride over the land. Where is Death? Where is God? Who will stop this, Angel? Who will—" but he's cut off as Cas places his hand to the reaper's forehead, and the reaper burns, and falls, dead.

And then it's just Dean, holding tight to Tom, while Sam and Castiel turn to look at him.

Tom lets out a noise that Dean's heard before. A noise that's trying like hell not to be a sob, but can't stop itself. Suddenly, Sam and Cas watching him doesn't feel important. He cups his hand around the back of Tom's head. "You're okay," he whispers as Tom lets his head fall forward into Dean's shoulder. "You're okay."

Cas looks the way Cas always looks. Too inhuman for anything happening right now to register as odd. But Sam's brow is furrowed

and his jaw is tense. He's, at best, suspicious.

Dean rubs his hand over the short hair at the back of Tom's neck. "You're okay," he says again.

Chapter 10: Believe in Me

Chapter by oncethrown

"It's not a seal," Cas intones in his most gravelly voice as he, Sam and Dean arrive back in the hotel room. "It's not even much of an oddity, as far as hauntings go. Reapers are… uniquely corruptible among otherworldly creatures."

"So… this has nothing to do with Lilith or raising Lucifer?" Dean asks.

"I doubt it," Cas replies, matter of factly. "Something like this happens every couple hundred years or so."

"Oh, okay, just every other century. No big deal then," Dean spits. Castiel turns his ice blue eyes on Dean, with the same thoroughly unimpressed look he'd fixed on him when Dean had stabbed him in that barn.

"Depending on your perspective," Cas replies.

Dean overrules a desire to roll his eyes at the angel. "So… okay. The big bad is gone, the ghosts in the hotel are gone, and we fucked up a remedial hunt?"

"Yes," Cas confirms. "I'd advise you to stick to your mission without further side trips. We are only trying to avert the apocalypse, after all." And with that Castiel disappears.

"Angels, man," Dean huffs. "Even the one Angel who isn't that bad, is still a dick."

Sam shakes his head. "Well. At least we won't be around for the next suped up ghost explosion."

"Here's hopin—" Dean starts, but is cut off by a knock at their hotel room door. Sam's hand goes to his gun as fast as Dean's does, and Sam walks quietly to the door. He looks through the peephole, then turns to Dean with a frown.

"It's the guy from the conference room," he mouths.

A dry cold feeling pops in Dean's chest, but he moves toward the door, waving to Sam to put his gun away as he does. Dean opens the door just wide enough that he can slide out of it, and quickly closes it behind him.

He greets Tom with a shaky, "Hey" then takes a few steps down the hallway, just far enough that Sam won't be able to see or hear them.

Tom looks at him and swallows hard. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking, coming to your room."

"It's fine," Dean says as reassuringly as he can manage. "Are you okay?"

Tom wraps his arms around himself. "Not really? I'm pretty freaked out about the whole… vengeful ghosts… thing. I uh… I tried to get a flight back to Oregon, but there's nothing available until morning and I don't think I can stay here tonight so… I guess I just wanted to say goodbye." He lets out a small, self deprecating laugh. "And if I'm being totally honest, I was nursing a hope that you would sneak out of your room tonight and come see me, and I wouldn't have wanted you to

think that I just wasn't answering."

Dean smiles. "If I'm being totally honest, I was planning to sneak out to see you and would have been disappointed if you weren't there."

Tom's smile back is sad, but warm.

"Do you wanna get dinner with me?"

Dean is surprised to realize that this question has actually come out of his own mouth, but now, with the question hanging between them, he realizes how desperately he wants Tom to say yes. He hasn't seen him for so long… and he nearly died today in a fucking pointless ghost explosion.

"What about your brother?" Tom asks.

"He'll get a salad from room service," Dean answers. "He'll be fine."

Tom rolls his eyes. "You know that's not what I meant.'

"You don't have to worry about that. I'll deal with it, and then I'll swing by your room and over dinner I'll try to convince you that this is the safest hotel in Texas now. And… If I can't convince you," Dean clears his throat. "I could always stay and protect you."

Tom's smile slowly broadens. "I'd like that."

"Okay. Okay, stay here, I'll be right back." Dean's heart thrums as he turns and heads back to his and Sam's room.

He's never thought about owning up to the truth before. Maybe, here and there, he's noticed a guy, and took too long a look before stopping himself, then wished he didn't have to worry about whether or not anyone saw him, but he's never genuinely considered walking up to his brother and admitting that Tom exists.

Dean sets his hand to the door knob, and for a moment, tries to imagine it. Walking in and telling Sam where he's really going.

If Tom were a woman he would. If Tom were a woman he *didn't even know* he would walk in there and say something along the lines of "The cute girl I just saved wants to get dinner. See you in the morning."

But that's not how it is. And aren't things complicated enough?

Sam's on the phone when Dean opens the door. He hears Sam quickly make an excuse, end the call and shove the phone back into his pocket, all in the time it takes Dean to move down the narrow little hallway into the main part of their room. He's surprised at the angry little flash that goes through him. Sam's been keeping something from him ever since he got back. He thinks he's getting away with it, that Dean's either too stupid or too distracted to notice.

And yes, Dean is well aware that he came back in here to grab his wallet and his phone and lie right to Sam's face, but it's different when he does it. His lie is protecting Sam and Sam's lie is shady and, if every other time Sam has lied is anything to go by, probably dangerous.

"Who was that on the phone?" Dean asks.

"Bobby," Sam answers immediately, and the lie is so obvious that Dean can't stop himself from rolling his eyes. Sam huffs, but doesn't say anything. Dean checks his pocket for his wallet, and scoops his phone up off his bed. He absent-mindedly reaches for his duffle, then realizes that he can't take a change of clothes or his toothbrush with him without tipping Sam off.

"How did that guy know where our room was? Sam asks.

"How should I know?"

"Because you clearly know him from somewhere," Sam answers. "You turned on a fucking dime to go after him when you saw those ghosts going after him down in the conference room."

"You've been taking shady phone calls ever since I got back," Dean retorts before he can stop himself, and he knows he fucked up as soon as it comes out of his mouth.

Sam scoffs. "You were dead for four months. Hunters call me sometimes when they need things."

Dean stares him down, but Sam doesn't give. Dean finally turns away, "Fine. I'm going down to the bar. Get a burger. Some whiskey. Pretend today never happened."

"You expect me to believe that's where you're going?" Sam asks.

"As much as I believe that you're secretly helping out hunters," Dean

replies, and walks out the door.

Chapter 11: An Old Familiar Feeling

Chapter by oncethrown

They're at a upscale steak house, tucked into a quiet, high-backed booth with velvet seats, looking down at menus without prices and having a bottle of wine delivered to the table by a guy whose entire job is to bring the wine before a question occurs to Dean that should have occurred to him much sooner.

"Wait, are you rich?"

Tom looks sheepish. "I'm comfortable."

Dean laughs. "That's what rich people say." He taps the menu "There's fillet mignon on here. And foie gras. I don't even know what foie gras is."

"So order some," Tom said.

“What do you even do? I've never asked you. Cause… I did not want to tell you what I did."

Tom squeezes his eye closed and bites his lip. "Shit. I don't want to tell you now."

"Why?" Dean asks as their bottle of wine comes out and the guy fucking pours it for them. Their actual waiter comes out right afterward and Tom orders roasted bone marrow for himself before Dean decides he is going to try the foie gras. Tom grins widely at Dean as the waiter walks away.

"You just ordered goose liver mousse."

Dean pulls a face. Tom laughs and assures him that it's good.

"Alright," Dean says, sticking out his tongue. "Well. I'm going to order a really expensive steak then."

"Be my guest."

"Also you have to tell me what you do."

Tom sighs. "I'm a real estate developer."

"A real estate developer? Why didn't you want to tell me that?"

Tom shrugs and grabs his wine glass. "Everyone already hates real estate developers… and then you're a ghost hunter and I have a Scooby Doo villain's job."

Dean laughs out loud and is still chuckling when his block of goose liver mush shows up.

It takes half a bottle of wine, a small plate of roasted bone marrow, a

dry aged New York Strip steak, half arosemary panna cotta, a nice scotch, a full explanation of how an EMT meter works and a detailed description of just how little EMT Dean's meter was picking up after the thing with Castiel and the Reaper to convince Tom that the hotel is ghost free now, and they can go back.

All Tom has to do to convince Dean to make out with him in the back of the cab is lean in.

Dean's still surprised at himself for how much of the truth he told Tom over dinner. He didn't tell him everything; there's just no reason a civilian needs to know that the Angel's don't seem to be able to find God and that there's a very good chance an ancient demon will release Lucifer from hell so they can get the apocalypse rocking and rolling. And someone as nervous about spooky things as Tom is doesn't need to know every grotesque detail of monster hunting. Dean tries to focus on some of his and Sam's stupider adventures. The town where everyone's wish came true. Sam getting wailed on by a god in the form of Paris Hilton.

He likes the way Tom looks at him when he talks about having saved someone.

And he likes the way Tom looks at him as they slip into Tom's hotel room, eyes wide and cheeks flush. Laughing and pulling Dean after him until they both topple onto the couch, already pulling each other out of their clothes. Dean is surprised at how slowly they undress each other, after all, it's been so long. But Tom has always been like this with him. Deliberate. Careful.

Savoring him like he's something special.

"Should we move this to the bedroom?" Dean asks as he slips his hand into Tom's underwear.

"I had another idea," Tom murmurs.

"Okay," Dean replies. It's the last word either of them speak until Dean is straddled over Tom's body, lowering himself onto Tom's cock.

"Slow as you need, baby," Tom whispers, his hand steady at the small of Dean's back.

Dean just nods, and grips the couch cushions a little bit harder as he lets his body sink down achingly slow, letting his body remember how this feels. Tom's head drops back against the couch and he looks up at Dean with a dazed, goofy smile.

"What do you want?" Dean asks.

"Wanna watch you feel good," Tom answers.

Dean pauses. All the times they've done this he's felt good. He's just been pretty passive through the feeling. It's not like he doesn't know how to do that, it's more the shock at being asked to. Tom seems to notice this, he props himself up on his elbows as much as he can. "Kiss me," he demands.

Dean falls forward eagerly to oblige, gasping at the feeling of Tom's cock being driven even further into his body just by the little change. He move into the kiss again, rocking his hips down, finding an angle that's good, finding a pace that's good, bracing himself against the back of the couch and letting himself go. He moves without caring what it looks like, or how he sounds, conscience only of Tom's hands on him, and his moaned assurances and the feeling of him moving

inside Dean until Dean comes like he's been struck by lightning. His orgasm rips through his whole body, and he's still panting and shivering as Tom pulls away, and starts to rearrange his willing limbs until he's back on the couch, knees still on the cushions, hands still braced against the back of the couch, with Tom sliding into him from behind.

"So good, Dean," Tom pants into ear before starting to kiss his neck and across his shoulders, spilling praise across Dean's skin. "So fucking good. God, you're beautiful, fuck, you're so beautiful."

Tom doesn't last long, Dean didn't expect him to. He comes with a growl, and only takes a moment to recover before pulling out, pulling Dean to his feet and leading him back to the bedroom, tossing the condom on the nightstand like an afterthought before yanking the covers back. They both slide underneath the heavy hotel duvet,Tom pulling Dean into a kiss before turning in his arms.

Deans asleep moments after Tom turns out the lights.

Chapter 12: Collide

Chapter by oncethrown

The sharp heat on his skin is familiar enough to bear a little longer. The knives have shredded him before. But he starts to struggle as the burning rips across his skin. He kicks and writhes, helpless against the straps, Alastair's laugh loud in his ears as the handprint on his shoulder bursts into flame.

"Dean? Dean? Hey, you're okay, hey, wake up."

Dean's sitting up in the dark, gasping as he realizing he was just dreaming. He's not on fire, he's not even warm, the sweat across his forehead and shoulders is cold in the air conditioned room, and there are no knives on his skin, just Tom's light touch at his shoulder.

"You okay?" Tom asks.

"Uh…" Dean tries, his voice cracking. "It's fine. I'm… fine just…"

"Nightmares," Tom says, matter of factly. "Bad ones?"

"Yes."

Tom rubs the back of Dean's neck, his thumb petting along Dean's hair line, but doesn't push Dean further.

"I'm sorry," Dean finallysays.

"For what?" Tom asks, his hand still at Dean's neck.

"For everything being…" Dean huffs. "Look, all the other times I've seen you, you've been far away from all the usual crap in my life. I didn't want to make this… dark too."

"It's not your fault, Dean," Tom says evenly, scooting further forward on the bed and setting his head to Dean's shoulder.

"If I—"

"No. You didn't fill the hotel with ghosts. You didn't fill the world with monsters. And I know you don't think you had a nightmare on purpose."

Dean wants to fight Tom on this. The apocalypse they are heading into is his fault. None of this would be happening if he'd saved Sam in time, or thought of a better plan than selling his soul, or just been strong enough at any point in the last few years. But he knows if he brings that upTom will just push it aside, and so he lets Tom pull him back down, pull covers over him, hold him, nuzzle against his shoulder.

He's had nightmares during one night stands before, but this feels different. Tom isn't being showy or going overboard in comforting him. He's just sleepily curling around Dean. Touching him like his brain isn't even involved. Dean lets it go on until Tom has stilled, and his breathing has evened out, and Dean has realized that he isn't going to be able to get back to sleep. He starts trying to work his way-out of Tom's grip, moving slow so as not to wake him, but he hasn't even reached the edge of the bed before Tom mutters "Where are you going?"

"I can't get back to sleep that easy," Dean admits as he hears a click and the bedside lamp suddenly blares into the room.

"Sorry," Tom says, bringing his hand from the lamp to his eyes."

"It's okay. I'm just gonna get some air."

"There's a balcony," Tom offers. "And more whiskey."

Dean waves down at his naked body. "Tonight probably isn't the night to cross naked outdoor whiskey drinking of my bucket list. I'm just going to walk around a little bit."

Tom nods, but his face falls. "Are you going to come back if you leave now?"

The question momentarily stuns Dean. No one he'd just slept with had ever asked him that.

But Tom's hardly a one night stand anymore. And Dean has walked away from him plenty of times not knowing if they would ever cross paths again, bu somehow now is the time Tom looks like he doesn't believe he'll see Dean again.

"Yeah," Dean says, bending down to kiss him. "Yah, I'm coming back. I can just… walk down to that little hotel store thing and get some Benadryl or something."

Tom climbs out of bed and rifles through his pants pocket, pulling out his room key. "Here, there's a little machine down there. You pay with the key and they charge your room."

"Am I taking your key so you're sure I'm coming back?" Dean asks.

"No, you're taking my key so you can pick me us up some ice-cream," Tom answers with a smile.

The pajamas that Tom had thrown at Dean while specifying that he wanted Ben and Jerry's Pistachio ice-cream are about three inches too long in the leg and Dean shuffles to the elevator glad that no one else is around this late at night, and wondering if Tom is really that much taller than he is.

That Tom didn't want to admit he was sending Dean downstairs in his pajamas and with his room key in order to make sure Dean would come right back was as obvious as that fact that that was exactly why he'd done it. And the idea that someone who'd woken him up from a nightmare, and knew what he did, and *watched him fail at it* only a few hours before putting so much effort into getting to spend another hour or so with him before falling back to sleep was…

… A lot.

Dean finds the little store, goes to the back where the freezers are, and finds the ice-cream.

Today the first time he's let almost all of the pieces of his life collide, and instead of everything falling to shit… he'd had a nice dinner. Maybe the best sex he'd ever had. Gone to sleep.

And, while he hated seeing Tom in danger… it wasn't terrible to have him know the truth. Telling him the kind of stories he never got to tell anyone had been fun. Made him feel lighter. And even with Alistair's laughter still in his ears being comforted like that was…

He's so absorbed in this thought that he's not even reading the labels, and he doesn't hear footsteps behind him.

He jumps when he hears his name, turns, and freezes when he sees Sam.

Sam's in gym clothes, just a little red in the face. He's giving Dean's clothes- the hotel bathrobe, the soft blue henly, and the overlong green and blue plaid pajama pants a once over that stops a little too long at the side of Dean's neck. Dean keeps himself from bringing his hand to the spot, but remembers with startling clarity the sensation of Tom's teeth there earlier.

"I followed you down to the bar to apologize," Sam says. "But you weren't there."

Dean shrugs and forces a grin. "I uh… met someone," he says. His tone is almost perfect. Almost convincing. Not convincing enough to over shadow the fact that he's standing here in what are very clearly another man's pajamas, though, because Sam crosses his arms over his chest and raises his eyebrows. "You picked up a girl in the ten minutes it took me to follow you?"

Dean shrugs. "There weren't a lot of people at the hotel bar. I went

down the street."

"Where down the street?" Sam asks.

"The steakhouse," Dean answers. "The girl at the desk said it was good, I wanted to go somewhere quiet and I was starving."

Sam scoffs and nods. "Right. Okay. Fine."

Dean can feel the argument in his throat. Sam was lying to him earlier. Why can't Dean keep his harmless lie if Sam is keeping a bigger one? Why can't he just have this? After everything that collided today, can't he just keep this one thing separate?

"Why am I getting the third degree here?" Dean asks. "You're the one out running in the middle of the night."

"The middle of…" Sam starts. "Dean, it's 10:30."

This comes as a genuine shock. Dean recovers as quickly as he can. "Oh."

Sam's exasperation turns to genuine concern. "Are you okay? You've been weird all day."

It's hard to be mad at Sam when he's just trying to help, and it's hard to lie when Dean's been honest for the first time all night. He looks up at Sam's face, and remembers a couple years ago, when Tom had asked him how he thought Sam would react, and Dean hadn't been

able to imagine anything terrible. Awkward. Uncomfortable. Embarrassing. Shameful.

But not terrible.

Sam had forgiven him for what he'd done in Hell. Nothing could ever be worse than that.

Dean clears his throat. "Okay, look… the guy who came by the room earlier? I told him where we were staying, because I ran into him earlier in the afternoon and I told him he should come by if he saw anything weird and I was a little freaked out to see him here."

"Why?"

"Because," Dean starts. "I know him."

Sam looks over Dean's borrowed pajamas and hickey again, then asks, gently, "From where?"

"Carthage, Oregon."

Chapter 13: Collide Part 2

Chapter by oncethrown

Dean clears his throat. "Okay, look… the guy who came by the room earlier? I told him where we were staying, because I ran into him earlier in the afternoon and I told him he should come by if he saw anything weird and I was a little freaked out to see him here."

"Why?"

"Because," Dean starts. "I know him."

Sam looks over Dean's borrowed pajamas and hickey again, then asks, gently, "From where?"

"Carthage, Oregon."

Sam's entire face furrows, from the brows down, then slowly opens back up, his jaw dropping, his eyes widening and his eyebrows jumping all way up to his hairline.

"Oh," he manages. "Um… okay. So… your *thing* in Carthage is actually…"

"His name's Tom," Dean says quietly. He yanks the freezer door open, grabs a tub of pistachio ice-cream then turns and walks toward the allergy medication.

It takes a couple moments before Sam lurches after him. "Look, man…

I'm sorry. I wouldn't have been hassling you if I'd known."

"It's fine," Dean says, nabbing a miniature box of Benadryl off the shelf. He does not want to have this conversation out in public, he doesn't want to have this conversation at all. Sam knowing isn't the worst thing in the world… but having a long involved conversation about it, especially *right now*, might just be.

"Right. I just… You know that… I'm all good with this, right? Like, you being gay doesn't change anything."

Dean pauses in the medication aisle and turns around. "I'm not…" He scans the little store very carefully. "I'm not gay."

Sam's face refurrows. "Okay… so you just… went out on a date with this Tom guy? Then back to his hotel room?"

"Who say anything about a date?" Dean asks.

"No one goes to a steakhouse alone, Dean. Date. With Tom. Who… you have dated before. Right?"

"Look… it's…" Dean huffs. "Sometimes we happen to cross paths. We have a good time. But it's just him. There aren't any other guys. And there are plenty of women. Women recently too. Anna. And the girl at Octoberfest."

"Alright. If you say so."

"Yeah, well, I do say so." Dean marches toward the check out register, Sam on his heels.

"I'm sorry. I'm just… we spend hours alone in the car together. You're not usually shy about sharing details I don't need to know about… unless you really like someone. And I… I guess I'm just surprised you never brought this up, especially cause you met this guy… what? A couple years ago? Whenever we had that fist hunt in Oregon?"

Dean opens his mouth to correct Sam, but closes it and quickly runs his items through the self scanner. This is really not the time to bring up that, actually, Tom's has been around since Dean was fourteen. "Sam, I really don't want to get into this right now, okay? I don't want this to be a big deal and it's… it's just not about you, man."

"Right. I know. Okay… but I mean. You know you can talk to me about this right?"

"Yes. Talking good. Got it. Goodnight, Sam," Dean says as he turns and walks back toward the elevator.

The shower is running when Dean gets back to the room. He puts the ice-cream in the mini fridge and drops the Benadryl on top of it. He walks around the room, playing the conversation he just had with Sam over in his head from start to finish. He sort of thought he would feel different after telling Sam. Like it would change him somehow. Maybe that part takes more than a two minute conversation.

He walks around the room again, and takes off the robe. After a few moments of hesitation, he takes off the pajamas too, and walks to the

bathroom, taking care to open the door as noisily as he can mange.

"Dean?" Tom asks.

"Want any company?"

Tom laughs warmly. "Sure. I suppose I can make room."

Dean pulls back the shower curtain, revealing that the shower, like the rest of the suite, is elegant, and enormous. "Make room," Dean scoffs. "We could fit three more guys in here."

"I definitely don't have the energy for that," Tom replies, smirking and offering Dean the soap. Dean takes it and Tom turns around, adding, "And I only have two more condoms."

Dean starts running the soap over Tom's back. The scent of lemon blooms between them. "I don't think I have enough energy for *that*, but I could try."

The first nock at the door doesn't wake Dean, at least not full. The second knock pulls him across the divide between sleep and waking, but it's not until the third knock, and the familiar, plaintive, "Dean," comes through the door that Dean jolts up.

"Whassit?" Tom mutters next to him, face still mushed down against

his pillows.

"It's Sam," Dean replies.

"Oh," Tom yawns as Dean slides out of bed, snatches the robe off the floor and jams his arms into the sleeves.

Tom sits up suddenly as Dean crosses the hotel room. "Sam? Oh fuck."

"It's okay," Dean replies, grabbing the door and pulling it open just a sliver. Before he can even say anything, Sam shoots his arm into the crack of the door and levers it open far enough for him to slide inside the room, a duffle hanging off either shoulder.

"Sam? What the fuck is this?" Dean demands.

"Get dressed," Sam barks. "The real FBI is here and the girl at the desk called our room to give us a heads up, but we've gotta move. Now." He drops Dean's bag on the floor, freezes for just a moment, and then slowly raises his arm and waves. Dean turns, following Sam's gaze to see Tom, blushing firetruck red, and wrapped in a sheet from the waist down.

"Uh, hi," Sam says. "You must be Tom."

"Uhhhh," Tom replies, looking to Dean.

"He knows," Dean sighs, moving to the living room and grabbing his discarded clothes off the flor. "I ran into him in the hotel store last night and…"

"It's hard to lie convincingly in someone else pajamas," Sam offers. "Sorry to meet you like this."

"Umm… yes," Tom replies, pulling the sheet a little higher up his body. "Also…me."

With relief, Dean finds his underwear. He takes his wad of wrinkled clothes to the bedroom and pulls the French doors closed behind him. He shucks the robe and hands it to Tom.

"Why didn't you mention that you cam out to your brother on a Ben and Jerry's run?" Tom whispers.

"Because that's not what last night was about," Dean answers, pulling on last nights underwear and jeans as quickly as he can.

"Looks like he took it well."

Dean finishes doing up his fly and shoves his head into his Tee shirt. "Yeah. I guess. Look, I'm really sorry to run out on you like this. This isn't the morning I had planned."

"Me neither, but um… my phone number's the same."

Dean pulls n his flannel, trying to do buttons up quickly while still sounding sincere. "I have it. And you've got my… umm… permanent number."

"Alright. Don't be a stranger," Tom says. He glances to out to the living room, where Sam is resolutely standing facing the door. Dean can tell that he's angled just enough to see the two of them out of his periphery.

"I won't this time," he promises.

Tom nods. "Text me when you evade the authorities."

Dean laughs outlaud, then leans in to kiss Tom goodbye.

As promised, Dean texts Tom from the next town over. Just a quick message, saying he's safe. He isn't sure if he should elaborate. 'I've successfully escaped the FBI and I was happy to see you again' is a very difficult line to walk. He's about to risk and emoji when Same comes back from picking up breakfast. He hands Dean his paper wrapped egg-sandwich.

"So. Tom," Sam starts.

Dean decides not to look up from unwrapping his sandwich. If Sam insists on having this conversation again, he can carry it.

"He seems cool."

Dean chews. Sam jams his son into his breakfast parfait. Digs out a strawberry. "Not what I was expecting, I guess."

Dean almost bites at this, but stops himself.

"I mean… not that I had like… ever thought a about it. I just mean. You know. He was cool about us needing to run from the cops."

Dean shrugs and bites off another mouthful of rubbery egg and stale croissant.

"Come on, Dean. Throw me a bone here."

"Throw you a bone?"

"Yeah. I get why you wouldn't have brought it up before, and why you didn't want to get into it last night, but are we seriously never going to talk about you having a boyfriend?"

"Jesus, Sam. Boyfriend?"

Maybe that's a little strong but seriously, our first hunt in Carthage was what? Three years ago. You kept in touch. You once drove a hundred miles in a snowstorm to see him, then stayed late the next day. And you just sent him a checking in text. That's a lot of relationship stuff for a Hunter."

Dean wants to tell Sam to shut up and eat his stupid yogurt… but he's not wrong. And Sam is missing quite a few years and doesn't seem to have registered Tom from their month or so of school in Oregon. And Dean knows that Sam is still keeping secrets from him… but it wouldn't feel terrible to talk to someone about this for once.

"I didn't meet him in Carthage on that hunt. I already had his number."

"Oh. Okay."

"You were at Stanford. I think Dad was working a case in Washington. Or maybe Idaho. Doesn't matter. I was in Carthage on my own. Saw him at a gas station and we got a drink because… we had… sort of a weird thing back in high school."

"Oh," Sam says. "I'd forgotten we even stayed there. So this guy's been around since you were… sixteen?"

"Fourteen," Dean corrects him gently. "And… a night here and there. A couple texts. It's complicated, Sam."

"Well. We're driving all the way to Montana based on the latest information from Bobby. We have time for a complicated story."

Dean sighs. "Fine. But I get to pick the music."

Chapter 14: On the Outside

Chapter by oncethrown

The first couple weeks after Texas are weird.

It's not that Sam *cares*, exactly. Dean being bisexual doesn't *bother* him, or anything. It's just… weird.

Dean does tell him a few things as they drive. He dances around what exactly happened between him and Tom when they were fourteen, just saying that he wishes he had reacted differently when Tom expressed interest. He admits that he was nervous to meet Tom in that bar the first time and that things were pretty tame when they went back to the motel, and that he has no idea where he got the guts to do any of it, even just get the drink. He also tells Sam that he made plans to meet up with Tom before they'd even gotten into town the one time the two of them worked a case in Carthage. He kind of lightly paints in what he and Tom do together on the rare occasions they cross paths. Dinner. Wine. Hot Tub. Scooby Do. Being…together.

After Dean admits that he's had sex with Tom he seems to lose either his nerve or his interest in saying anything else. He cranks up the radio, playing Led Zeppelin too loudly to talk over, and Sam takes the hint.

They are passing through the Oklahoma Panhandle before Sam has admitted to himself that it's unreasonable for him to be upset that Dean kept this big a secret from him for fifteen years. If things had been the other way around, Sam wouldn't have tried to tell his ten year old brother about an awkward, truncated first… not quite romance. The more he thinks about it the more he realizes that he wouldn't have even had the balls to get a drink with the guy, not when Dad was still alive. And for Dean it must have felt like so much more of a risk. There's rebellion and then there's *rebellion.*

But it's still weird. It's weird for the next couple weeks when Dean will get a text and force a smile off his face before hurriedly shoving his phone back into his pocket. It's wierd when they stop at a diner and the waitress flirts with Dean and he flirts back, catches the overly curious look Sam didn't realize he was fixing Dean with, and returns it with a scowl.

It's weird that Dean, who never seems to believe he could be important to anyone, or that he's worth anything, has someone out in the regular, civilian world, who checks in with him sometimes. Who wants to know that he's okay.

It's good though, Sam thinks, every time he catches Dean. Dean should have something like that.

They're in Bedford, Iowa, wrapping up after killing off a siren. Sam wishes things were better, and is starting to wonder if coming clean about Ruby would help alleviate this ugliness between he and Dean, but still can't convince himself that he could make Dean understand what he and Ruby are working toward.

More to get away from Dean for a little while than for any other reason, Sam takes a long shower, even though the heat hurts his bruises. He gets out of the shower to find Dean leaning back against the pillows of his rumpled twin bed, grinning at his phone. His eyes flick up guiltily when Sam walks into the room, and Sam can see the way Dean forces his shoulders down out of his ears before he goes back to his phone, tapping his thumbs hurriedly against the keyboard.

Sam picks out some clothes that are comfortable enough to sleep in

and slowly repacks his duffle before asking, in the most precariously nonchalant tone he has ever attempted, "Is that Tom?"

"Uh. Yeah," Dean answers. He taps out another text. "He uh. Got a dog."

Dean turns his phone outward, so Sam can see a picture of Tom and what looks an English sheep dog, mixed with something that made it enormous but short haired.

"You leave me any hot water?"

Dean throws another book across the room, with a sound that's more of a snarl than anything else.

"Dean," Sam starts. "It's okay, it's not like—"

"No, I'll tell you what it's not like," Dean says. "It's not like this Carver Edlund mother fucker is going to live long enough to write another one of these fucking books." He points to the one he just launched into the wall. It's lying on the ground, pages down, folded underneath the binding like broken legs. "That one? Do you fucking know what happens for an entire chapter in that one?"

"Fucking?" Sam guesses. "Look, man, there are some unfortunately graphic chapters about me too, and I—"

"It's different, and you know it," Dean yells. "It's… you know. In Carthage. And it wasn't…" Dean seems too mad to force words together. "Fucking. It was nice. And *private."*

"Look, we need to figure out what's going here, how about you go get us some lunch, try not to think about it, and I'll try to track down the author?"

Dean stares him down for a moment, then snarls again, grabs his jacket and walks out the door.

Sam sits down and flips his lap top open, his fingers hovering over the keys, ready to google… and then he glances back at the book. Whatever has Dean so upset is private. Private and none of Sam's business. Private and none of Sam's business and something that Dean would clearly hate for Sam, or the wider reading public, to know about.

Sam googles the publisher.

The motel's internet connection is really slow.

He watches the loading bar creep across the top of the screen. A quarter of the way across. A third of the way across.

At about halfway across his willpower gives out. He moves across the room, tiptoeing, like the book might catch him in the act of violating Dean's wishes and try to run off.

It takes him a few minutes to find the scene that Dean so strongly objected too.

He doesn't like… study it or anything. He skims. He scans for words that hint at things he doesn't need to know and reads around them. He knows that Dean's been more open with him lately, but there are so many things he doesn't know how to ask, and that Dean isn't offering up, and even when he knows that Dean and Tom only text back and forth every couple weeks… Dean's been different since the job in Texas. Sam can't help wanting to understand why.

The euphemisms for what happens between Dean and Tom on the rug by the fireplace are clumsy. The end of the chapter is schmaltzy.

But the upshot is clear. Dean and this Tom guy care about each other.

"I need some air," Dean huffs, pushing his chair back from the table.

"Dean," Sam protests.

"I need some air," Dean repeats.

Sam sighs and looks back at Adam apologetically. "Dean had a… tense relationship with our Dad."

"Picked up on that," Adam replies.

Sam gives Dean a few minutes to cool off before he goes out to the

yard to try to talk to him. He's surprised to realize that Dean's on the phone.

"Yeah, I know I just… don't really want to talk about it," Dean is saying. "Yeah, safe enough…yes… It is complicated. How did you guess?"

For a second, Sam thinks about going out and interrupting, but then realizes that maybe this is what Dean needs right now. He goes back in the house. He should make sure Adam knows his way around a shot gun.

Chapter 15: When I Picture Myself Happy

Chapter by oncethrown

Cas is not a great Hunting partner, Dean has to admit, but he *is* a great distraction. His inability to tie a tie, or hold his badge upright or pretend, even for a couple seconds that he's human almost completely lets Dean forget about Lucifer walking the Earth, and everything Sam did that lead to Lilith rising, and the sound of Sam's screams as he detoxed in Bobby's panic room.

Showing Cas the ropes is actually kind of fun. Dean hasn't had fun for so long— it's intoxicating. And when Cas says that the fun is going to end, that, for him, *everything* is going to end tomorrow… Dean just wants to do what he can to keep the good times rolling. Cas thinks he's going to die a virgin? Not on Dean's watch.

He herds Cas into the Impala and drives north. When they stop for gas, and Dean ducks inside for something to drop into his empty stomach. If he remembers correctly, the place they're going serves food, but even by Dean's standards, it's pretty bad. He grabs a bag of trail mix, and, even without Sam there to heckle him into it, a slightly overripe banana. He pays the cashier, rips open his trail mix and is shoving a handful of peanuts, raisins and M&M into his mouth as he walks out to the car, and sees Cas sitting in the backseat, looking up at the flashing neon sign near the gas station entrance, advertising live bait.

And somehow, for the first time, Dean looks at Cas and realizes that he's cute. Not threatening, not alien, not exasperating. Actually kind of… hot. Blue eyes. Touseled hair. That jaw could cut glass.

A fuzzy image of Cas, not with a fatigued girl in lingerie stretched out from being pulled off and put back on so many times, but with him, under some tree on a backroad somewhere, nothing but moonlight to illuminate the Impala's backseat.

Cas looks down from the bait sign, directly at Dean and for a panicked moment, Dean can't remember if Cas can read thoughts or not. He clears his throat, forgetting his mouth is full of trail mix, and nearly coughs up a gross mouthful of snack. Castiel regards this as dispassionately as he did the bait sign.

No… no. He can't. Castiel's an Angel. And he and Dean are like… brothers in arms. He's as tangled up in this Heaven and Hell bullshit as Dean is. Besides, now that the idea has floated through Dean's head, dragging a couple… vivivd possibilities with it, Dean's not sure how he feels about the idea of adding notches to his bed post with Tom texting him every couple weeks. They had talked about it. Tom had said there were other guys sometimes. Dean hadn't felt guilty about sleeping with Anna, in nearly the exact same circumstance— a last tryst on Earth before Angels fucked everything up.

But the thought of dropping back into the driver's seat and suggesting a decent motel or a deep enough shadow sends a hot, prickly feeling over Dean's skin that turns cold and drops into his stomach like a cannon ball of ice.

No. There is a perfectly reputable house of ill repute two hours up the highway, and they serve good beer.

Dean can feel the apocalypse at all times these days. It's like a constant weight, yoked across his shoulders. He's been marching into town after town, bowed under it. And here, with famine riding over the land, all he feels is the weight. Cas is scarfing down enough burgers to send White Castle out of business, Sam is shaking for demon blood and all Dean feels is tired. The whole town is being pulled into their vices, and Dean is just been dragged ever farther

under the knowledge that the end is coming, and they can't do anything to stop it.

Famine's words echoes in his head along with Sam's screams as he detoxes from another fall into his demon blood addiction. "Inside, you're already dead."

Dean's phone buzzes in his pocket. It's Tom. A video of the dog, barking at a lemon on the floor. It makes the whiskey twist in Dean's stomach.

They are no closer to finding Lucifer. They don't have anything that can stop him. Sam can't even stop himself from going full Dracula.

And the world is depending on them. People like Tom, who just wanted to live normal lives, aren't even going to know what hit them.

All of this is happening because Dean broke in Hell. All of this is happening because Dean couldn't stop Lilith. All of this is happening because he can't catch Lucifer. Everything he touches turns to ash. Especially the good stuff.

There's only one thing to do, and Dean knows that now. But there are a couple things he has to do first. After they kill the whore of Babylon, when he knows Sam is getting suspicious, he says he's going out to get ice, gets in the Impala and drives.

He's pulling into Tom's driveway before he realizes that he could have called. Should have called. Because everything he drove across the fucking country to say is true. And the sight of the warm light pouring out of the windows of Tom's A-frame makes Dean wonder if he came all this way to be talked out of what he knows is inevitable. Or if he just wanted to see all of this one last time.

He pulls around to the port-cohere and can hear the dog baking as he steps out of the car. Tom's already standing on the steps outside the door, the dog leashed next to him.

"Dean? Dean what are you doing here?"

The dog lurches forward, licks Dean's hand a couple times, and sits down, gazing up at him lovingly.

"Uh. I'm sorry I didn't call."

"It's okay. Uh. Come in."

Dean wants to. So badly. He wants to go inside and pretend… "Uh no. I can't."

Tom bits his lip and leans back against the door. "You drove here from where?"

"Minnesota."

"Wow. Okay. You drove here from Minnesota to stand on my deck?"

"No." Dean jams his hands into his jacket pockets. "Look, Tom… I came out here to tell you… I know the road on going down is short. And I'm okay with that. I think I've always known that, but—"

"What's at the end of your short road, Dean?" Tom interrupts.

Dean takes a breath. "It's going be bad. The stuff you're going to see on the news the next couple of days is going to be awf—"

"What are you going to do, Dean?" Tom cuts him off again.

Dean erupts. "I'm going to stop it! Okay? I'm going to do everything I can to save as many people as I can. When I leave here, I'm going to go tell an Archangel that he can use my body like a fucking muppet, because that's what it's going to take to beat the Devil!"

That brings Tom up short. His jaw drops. He stares for a few moments before he gets himself back together. "And he's not giving your body back, is he? You're not walking away from this one."

Dean shakes his head. "The angels need me to stop the apocalypse, and they aren't getting anything from me without agreeing to a few conditions."

"Dean, come inside."

"I'm gonna make sure you're safe, Tom. I promise."

"Come inside, Dean."

"I shouldn't," Dean manages.

"Goddammit, Dean. The apocalypse has waited a few million years it can't wait another forty five fucking minutes for you to eat something and tell me everything?"

Dean shakes his head and turns away, but Tom grabs his arm. Dean tries to tug it away, but Tom's grip only tightens. Dean knows dozens of ways to get out of that grip, even a handful that wouldn't hurt Tom.

Maybe he's just weak. Maybe he needs 45 minutes of comfort. Maybe, somewhere deep, he's even afraid and he's hoping that Tom will talk him out of it. Maybe he just wants more of a goodbye than a rehearsed speech on the doorstop.

He turns around.

"Come inside," Tom repeats.

"When I picture," Dean starts, clenches his jaw and force the rest out. "When I picture myself happy… I'm here. With you."

Tom stares again, then pulls Dean into a kiss. "Come upstairs," he whispers.

Dean follows.

Chapter 16: Hero's Journey

Chapter by oncethrown

Tom drags Dean through the door and into the kitchen, shoving him back against the kitchen island and kissing him so hard their teeth clack against each other.

Tom has no idea what Dean is talking about. He doesn't know why Dean has to go kill the devil, or even if he means, the actual devil he definitely can't make sense of the assertion that Dean is going to go give an Archangel his body, but he does know that Dean is talking like Tom is never going to see him again, and whether Tom can talk him out of it or not, he knows he wants this. Even if it's one last time.

He grabs Dean's hips and steers him back under the loft, kissing and shoving and tripping over Dean's feet and his own as he forces him back onto the couch. Dean drops down onto it like his knees have given out. For just a second, Tom thinks he might be brave enough to literally rip Dean's clothes off, but the second passes and he starts to frantically unbutton and unzip, while Dean tries to undress him just as fast and their hands bump and tangle until they are both naked.

Tom reaches to the end table, where there, thankfully, is a small bottle of lube left over from the previous night, when he'd had a glass of wine and felt a little lonely. Dean maneuvers himself a little lower on the couch and spreads his legs. Tom works him open way too fast, watching Dean's face carefully to make sure the pinch of discomfort doesn't turn into pain.

"That's enough," Dean grunts.

"I don't want to hurt—"

"It doesn't matter," Dean insists. He wraps his legs around Tom's back and forces him forward.

Tom braces himself against the arm of the couch. "No. Condom… we need a condom."

Dean lets out a long breath, nods and unwraps his legs from around Tom. Tom practically teleports up to the loft, pulls the condoms out of the box on his book shelf, then stops. He takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly, then walks half way down the stair case, the mania falling away. A frantic quickie on the couch isn't how he wants to say goodbye.

"Dean, come upstairs," he requests softly. He hears soft shifting and the quiet pad of bare feet across the wooden floor, and Dean appears, cock hard but smile soft at the bottom of the stairs. He walks up the spiral stairs to meet Tom on the landing, takes Tom's face in his hands, and kisses him, softly this time. It feels like the first rain drops of a big storm. When the temperature has dropped and the wind has kicked up and it feels like all of creation is holding its breath, then letting it go as the first drops hit the ground.

Dean sets his forehead to Toms, slots their fingers together, and guides him up to the loft.

Everything is slow and deliberate now. The way Dean unrolls himself back onto the bed. The way Tom carefully kisses his chest, his neck, his face before Dean urges him forward and Tom pushes into him.

They move together slowly, and Tom starts to hope that maybe Dean came here to be talked out of the next step in his plan. Dean can easily overpower him, he let Tom drag him inside. Let Tom push him back against the counter and onto the couch. And then he came up here because Tom asked. Whatever deadline he had seemed to be on when

he showed up clearly isn't as important as Tom making love to him.

Maybe he'll stay. Maybe Tom will finally get to know that he's safe.

When they've both finished, Dean wraps his legs around Tom's back again, and holds him there, long after they've both caught their breath.

Tom follows Dean into the shower. He wants to ask again for Dean to explain what's happening, but if Dean refuses (and Tom's sure he will), Tom doesn't want their last conversation to be one where he blows up at Dean and curses him out for being a martyr. He's spent years thinking that Dean's life is mysterious and complicated and dodgy in some sexy way, only to have been confronted with a truth he never could have imagined, and now, here his is again, getting just one little piece of the fantasy he's been wrapping around Dean Winchester since he was fourteen.

First, he'd dreamed that Dean, who wore a leather jacket and cursed sometimes, and took shop class but still wanted to hang around a dorky kid like him, could be his boyfriend. Then, when Dean had disappeared into the ether one day and never come back, Tom had started to daydream that maybe he'd come across Dean again someday and things would be different. It wasn't like he'd wasted away, pining for Dean or anything. It was just… a nice thought sometimes. Especially for the one of the only gay kids in a small town.

But then it had fucking happened. Tom had gone to go get gas on some shitty night and Dean Winchester had been standing there. All grown up, and handsome as hell, and when Tom had asked him out he'd said yes.

And just when things had started to go a little sour, when Tom started to get promoted and he'd heard from Dean less and less and realistic grown up thoughts had started to creep into his fantasy— like that Dean was probably a petty criminal, or a hit man, or the muscle for some drug cartel, or he wasn't texting back anymore because he was in jail, or too high, or dead— Dean had shown up again. Not running some grift, but there to play the hero. To save Tom's life.

Tom grew up reading about heroes. People who killed monsters. Dean was a hero that his fourteen year old self never would have imagined, and that, even now, Tom could hardly believe.

And he knows that when this happens, when the hero is facing his own death, and he goes to see someone he… loves, that person isn't supposed to talk him out it. That person isn't supposed to beg him to stay and ask if there's another way. That person is supposed to give him the courage to go on.

So Tom doesn't ask Dean to explain anymore. He washes him gently, and gets him a clean towel, and is making him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, when Dean's younger brother and the Angel from Texas suddenly appear in his kitchen.

Tom just has time to shout before Dean's brother grabs him, and the Angel grabs Dean.

He's still in the middle of that shout when he realizes he's not in his house anymore. He's somewhere darker and mustier.

A man in a wheel chair wearing a trucker hat looks up at Tom, who sheepishly closes his mouth.

"Okay. I guess I'll get the civilian a whiskey," the man says.

Chapter 17: Sioux Falls

Chapter by oncethrown

Dean gulps down the whiskey and drops the glass down on the table with a ringing thud. Across the table from where he sits, Bobby rolls hisses. Sam purses his lips and fills Dean's glass back up. Dean pounds that too , and drops the glass again.

"Dean," Sam starts. "Give us a chance."

"A chance to what?"

"Track down the rest of the horsemen. Get the rings. We're already halfway there, man."

"Even if we get all the rings, we have zero ideas on how to find Lucifer, or how to get him into the cage. We have no plan whatsoever for dealing with Lucifer without Michael."

"That doesn't mean you have to march off to sacrifice yourself, Dean. We can find another way. And if you really don't believe in use, then you can have Michael as a back up plan."

Silence falls between them, broken only by a muted tapping noise. Dean looks over to the counter, which Cas and Tom are leaning against. Tom is staring blankly ahead, tapping his empty tumbler of whiskey against his bottom lip. He doesn't seem to realize that he's doing it.

Sam grabs the whiskey bottle off the table and stands up. The sound of

his chair squeaking across the linoleum seems to bring Tom back online. Dean watches warily as Sam walks up to Tom, unscrews the top of the bottle and offers him more whiskey. Tom holds his glass out and Sam doles out a decent size pour.

If Sam tries to play Tom off of him— here, now, after the shit that Sam already pulled, Dean is going to walk outside, break his own fucking rib and let Michael find him.

But Sam just puts the cap back on the bottle and sets it on the counter.

"Dean, can we just talk in private for a second?"

Dean pushes down the desire to throw some nasty comment out at Sam. Something about how he doesn't need to hear what Sam has to say, or even that he doesn't trust Sam not to say yes to Lucifer after all the things he's seen Sam do in the last couple years. But he doesn't want to do it in front of Tom. Fifteen minutes ago he was still playing noble hero, and getting to have that role reflected back at him by the same quiet acceptance that Tom had always given him.

But then Sam and Cas had stormed in and taken that away, and left Dean unable to do anything other than what he'd always done— just try to keep Tom from learning how bad it really was. He gets up and follows Sam downstairs. Sam stops outside the door to the Panic Room. "Okay, look, I don't know how much you've told Tom—"

"How about I worry about what Tom does and doesn't know and you get to the point?"

"Fine," Sam huffs. "Bobby and I got ahold of Crowley. We've got a bead on Pestilence and Crowley is helping us track down Death while

he's at it."

"Crowley? The demon who tried to get us killed with bum info on the Colt?"

"The info pans out so far. So do you want to get in the car and hunt another horseman or what?"

"My car is in Oregon."

"Right. Go get Tom settled in, Cas and I will get the car."

Dean fights down the pure horror at what could happen to his car if he let's Cas zap it across the country. "The dog too. Tom's not going to want the dog left home alone."

"Well," the man in the wheel chair—Bobby— says to Tom as they watch Sam and Dean drive off. "I don't suppose you read latin?"

Tom shakes his head. "Sorry." He glances back toward the living room where Bubbles is still sleeping on the couch. Apparently Angel zapping is hard on dogs.

"Greek? Old French?"

It's clear from Bobby's tone that he's fishing, not really expecting Tom to show a sudden ability with uncommon languages, but Tom

apologizes again anyway. "I could… go into town for groceries?" He remembers the little bit that Dean has told him about Bobby, who has only come up in conversation just enough for Tom to understand that he is something of a father figure for Dean. "Maybe some Jack Daniels?"

Bobby regards him for an uncomfortably long moment. But hell, everything about this is uncomfortable. Tom knows that Dean's time, energy and desire to deal with his sexuality have a low ceiling, and he can respect that. What with all the surviving emotional abuse, hunting monsters, and saving the world, Tom understands that Dean hasn't exactly had an opportunity to make it to a pride parade, or even indulge in a little bit of queer cinema binge.

But being okay with those things when he only interacts with Dean one on one, and trying to figure out how to respect Dean's privacy when he's just been abandoned in South Dakota while Dean and his brother go off to hunt a fucking horseman of the apocalypse while their Angel friend tries to hunt down actual, literal death, and is now trapped in a house with an old man who may have no idea how he and Dean know each other is… impossible.

Tom clears his throat, and Bobby sighs.

"Look, kid, how about I make this easy on you? I know. I'm not supposed to know. Dean and I talked about it for less than 10 seconds a long time ago. He wants me to act like I don't know, and I didn't expect to be in the situation we have here, where it's ridiculous to keep pretending I don't know." Bobby starts wheeling away from the door into the kitchen.

Tom watches him roll away, feeling himself shift onto more familiar ground. "And that 10 second talk… that was good enough for you?"

Bobby stops at the table and grabs a book off of one of the many stacks of books. He opens it and sets it down in front of himself. "Look Dean… Dean hasn't had an easy life. He can be… well. A bull-headed, pain in the ass idjit who I sometimes worry likes being miserable. I know next to nothing about you, Tom, but the little I do know makes me think that he's not like that when he's with you." Bobby looks up from his book, and refills his glass of whiskey. "That maybe, when he's off in Oregon, with you, he lets himself be happy. And by god, I hope that's the case, cause that's all I want for both of them. Sam and Dean."

Tom finds himself feeling off-kilter yet again today. Bobby is not unlike some of uncles, or even his father. He'd expected a speech about how Bobby appreciated Dean's discretion, or how the couple seconds they had ever spent acknowledging that Dean was something other than exactly as macho and exactly as heterosexual as he pretended to be was enough to be getting on with. That Bobby, with his shot gun and his trucker hat and his 12 dollar bottle of whiskey and yard full of beat up cars, is ready to sit here getting closer than Tom is sure Dean would believe to giving them his blessing is discomfiting.

Tom clears his throat. He walks into the kitchen, retrieves the now empty glass that Bobby had given him when he first got here, and pours himself a little more whiskey than he thinks is wise. Apparently it is the apocalypse, after all. "When he's with me, in Oregon, I think he's happy."

Bobby nods, then shakes his head with a sigh and unearths a Chinese food menu from under a stack of ancient looking books. He hands it to Tom. "We've got a long night in front of us. Get a couple entrees and two orders of cream cheese wontons."

Dean knots his hands together as he finishes talking. Tom stares up at him, wide eyed, then rakes his hands through his hair.

"Okay," he says, pulling his hair into a peak at the back of his head. "Explain it to me again. Pestilence. Like… the concept of disease… but a guy. The Bible guy. That's real."

Dean drops down next to him on the musty double bed in Bobby's spare bedroom.

"Yes. We've all got seats to Revelations Live right now."

"So… there isn't disease anymore. That's done?"

Dean shakes his head. "No. He's just… gone back to wherever he was before. He has to recover. And there's plenty of disease. He's got a bunch of uh… killer zombie virus loaded up somewhere. Ready to send out into the public. We've got to stop that too."

"So… from here, you have to find Death. Defeat him, take his magic ring, use it to open door to a cage for Lucifer… cause Satan is out there somewhere, and then somehow get Satan into the cage, so that he can't fight with his brother Michael, and start the apocalypse."

"Yes. That's exactly right."

"And… Michael needs you to give him your body so he can come to earth, and also there is a bunch of zombie virus…somewhere."

Dean sighs and leans into Tom, feeling a little bad about trying to draw a little bit of patience and strength from him again. "Look. It's a lot. It's too much. I know that. But uh… Cas can give you… you know the symbols on all the windows?

"Yeah."

"It's warding. They keep angels from being able to find the house, or get in. Cas can put the same kind of symbols on your ribs so hat the Angels can't find you."

Tom nods, but his faces scrunches up. "Like… in case the Angel's win?"

"Uh… no. So that… they couldn't find you and… use you against me while we're working on this plan."

"Like… leverage" Tom asks. "If the angels knew about me, they'd try to…"

"Get me to save you by saying yes. Hurt you. Capture you. I don't know."

Tom doesn't reply, he just stares at the floor. After a few moments, he sets his hand on Dean's knee. "Do you… do you want me to leave?"

Dean starts to settle his hand over Tom's but stops himself.

"I'm not…. Trying to chase you off. I just don't want you to feel held hostage here. You're a couple hundred miles from your family, and I am literally going to chase down Death soon "

"When do you have to leave?"

"About 45 minutes."

Tom nods, and squeezes Dean's leg gently. "Will you just lay down with me for a little while?"

Dean nods. It feels strange to take a moment for himself in the middle of a crisis like this, but Dean wouldn't feel right saying no. And after a few minutes of feeling Tom breath peaceful I his arms he realizes he wanted this too. He pulls Tom a little big closer, squeezing him around the middle.Tom turns in his arms and sets his forehead against Dean's

"Death, huh?"

"We already eat War, Famine and Pestilence."

"Right."

"We have to," Dean says.

"No, I know," Tom replies. "I just… the last couple times I've seen you. I guess they felt more solid."

"Solid?"

"Like… you weren't a one night stand anymore, you weren't as much of a mystery. I was starting to…"

"Please," Dean says. "Don't say it."

Tom falls silent, but moves his body forward and presses a sweet kiss to the corner of Dean's mouth. Dean turns into it just as the door creeks open.

"Uh," Sam stutters.

Dean's too tired to pull away and he's been made acutely aware of how pointless it would be to try. Tom's been drinking whiskey with Bobby. Researching with Sam. Having intensely awkward conversations with Castiel. Everyone who is important to Dean knows who Tom is now.

And Bobby has been a little thrown for a loop, and Cas has upsettingly blunt, and Sam's been doing that super empathetic-understanding-big-eyes thing that Dean hates. And when Dean slowly sits up, leaving his arm draped over Tom's waist.

"What do you want?"

"The weather in Illinois is getting pretty--"

"Apocalyptic?" Dean offers. Sam gives him a tight lipped smile in response.

"Yeah. Okay. Give me a couple minutes and we can roll out."

"Okay. I'll meet you downstairs."

Sam closes the door and Dean lays back down.

"I'm sorry. I guess there isn't much we can do in a few minutes."

"This is enough."

Chapter 18: It's Gonna Be Okay

Chapter by oncethrown

The page starts to swim in front of Bobby. He's been telling himself that all the answers he's looking for are only a page or two for the last few hours, and it's not getting any truer. He sighs, runs his hands over his face, and picks up the coffee mug next to his book. It tastes like room temperature gasoline, but he drinks the whole thing with a grimace anyway. Taste isn't important right now, caffeine is. He didn't sell his should and send Dean and Sam after Death himself for them to have no idea what to do with the rings if the boys come back.

When.

When the boys come back.

Bobby ran out of hope days ago, and faking it for Dean's… whatever he is… is only making it clearer to Bobby that he doesn't believe the things he's saying anymore. If the boys weren't still out fighting, Bobby's pretty sure he'd just drink until he passed out, and let the apocalypse take him. He's fought monsters all his life, there's no shame in losing to the biggest and baddest of them.

He sets down the empty coffee mug just as his cell phone rings, flashing Sam's name across the call screen. Bobby seizes it.

"Sam?" he demands.

"We got it, Bobby," Sam says.

Bobby feels the air leave his lungs like it was just sucker punched out of him. "Boy, you mean to tell me you and Dean beat Death?"

"Uh," Sam replies. "It actually sounds like Dean and Death… had a nice lunch. I didn't really get a chance to talk to him about it. He's… I think he took a second to call Tom."

"Good. He's been nerve cleaning the house all day. I finally had to send him out to find some yard work to do because I couldn't concentrate with him trying to scrub everything." Bobby huff. "I think he's growing on me though."

"Yeah," Sam says. "Yeah me too, which is why… I think I figured out a way to stop Lucifer. Stop the whole apocalypse."

"Well, lay it on me."

"I say yes to Lucifer—"

"Sam—"

"I say yes to Lucifer, I walk him to the edge of the cage, and I jump in."

"Sam—"

"We've seen people fight possession. You've done it."

"That was against some punk-ass demon. Not the devil himself!"

"Same concept," Sam shoots back. "We don't have any other plan with a snowball's chance. This could work and, you know, I'm — dammit. Gotta go."

The line goes dead and through his shock Bobby hears the back door open and hears foot steps rushing across the worn out carpet.

"They did it!" Tom announces, bursting into the kitchen. "Dean said he and Death split a freaking deep dish and Death just gave him the ring!" Tom lets out a noise more like a giggle than anything else. "Death. Fuck! Is there still whiskey?" He spots the bottle on the table, pours about two shots into a tumbler sitting out on the table and shoots the whole thing. "Maybe this is going to be okay, huh Bobby?"

Bobby can't bring himself to correct the kid, so he just nods, toasts Tom with his empty coffee mug and starts wondering how in the hell he's going to talk Sam out of his awful plan.

Sam has been looking for the right way to say this ever since he made his decision, and he still hasn't found the right words, but this feels like the right moment.

"Hey, Dean, we've got to talk about something."

"Oh, Jesus fucking— bisexual. Okay? Are you happy? I'm fucking bisexual. Do people think I don't know that? I *know*. I've been jerking off to Gunner Lawless since I was thirteen years old, I just don't want to fucking talk about it."

"That's… uh. Not what I wanted to talk about," Sam replies.

"Oh."

"Who is Gunner Lawless?"

"Really?" Dean asks. "The wrestler?"

"Not ringing a bell," Sam says. "But uh… you know. Congrats, I guess?"

"Shut up. What did you want to say?"

Sam shakes his head and tries to reset himself before he loses his nerve. "Look, if I do this— swan dive into hell and take Lucifer along for the ride, you have to promise not to bring me back."

Dean's so taken aback he almost slams the brakes, Sam feels the car jerk as Dean's foot moves between the peddles before he lays his foot back down on the gas, and they start to wind even faster through the dark cornfield. "Wait, what?"

"You can't bring me back."

"The hell I can't," Dean spits back.

"I want you to promise me that you won't try to bring me back."

"No—"

"Dean!" Sam cuts him off. "This is my choice. I'm asking you to respect that."

"Well, I don't. You want me to just let you die?"

"Yes," Sam says quietly. He's been thinking about this a lot lately too. It's not that he's suicidal…but he is done. He can see a future where he ends the apocalypse and saves the world. But he can't see a world where he has to keep going after the apocalypse. He can see a world where he's gone, and Dean doesn't have to hunt anymore, and Sam can stop fighting like he always wanted too. It's not that he wants to die, it's more like he realizes that… with the life he and Dean lead, they are going to die sooner rather than later. And he's okay with this being the way he goes out.

"Sam… you're going to go to hell. And not just regular hell, VIP Hell. You can't expect me to just let you spend eternity in a place that's going to make my tour look like Paris in the spring?"

"Dean you can't do anything that's going to mess with the cage.

Nothing that could let Michael and Lucifer back out. It's too dangerous. You have to let me go."

"I can't do it," Dean says. Even in the dark, Sam can tell he's crying.

"You have to," Sam repeats.

"And then what? Am I supposed to drive around hunting roogaroos and zombies with Bobby?"

"You're supposed to throw my shit away, pack up Tom and the dog, and drive for Oregon. Maybe do some site seeing along the way. Settle down with someone who loves you, and have a normal life."

Dean scoffs, turns the music up, and doesn't say a word for another hundred miles.

It's all blood. Cas is splattered all over the foliage, Bobby is laying dead in the mess, and Sam has only fought his way far enough out from under Lucifer's stamping boot to be able to see it, and feel the impact of his fists hitting Dean over and over again. The slickness of Dean's blood between his fingers and Dean's cheekbone breaking under his fist.

He can't open the cage and jump in, he can't even stop his fist from slamming into Dean's face again.

"Stop it!"

The voice is loud, but shaking. It wobbles over the vowels like a scratched record. Lucifer looks past Dean, to the now open passenger side door of the Impala, where Tom is climbing out.

Dean lets out a howl that might have been the word no, but it's so visceral and his face is so bashed in it's impossible to tell.

Sam feels his face pull into a smirk as Lucifer raises his hand, and brings his fingers together.

"Let him go!" Dean and Tom yell it over each other, each begging for the other's life, and finally, Sam breaks through.

He drops his hand before his fingers can snap Tom into a thousand pieces, and takes a step back from Dean. "I got it. I got him," Sam chokes out. He feels like one of those air hockey pucks, floating just above the surface of Lucifer's rage. He doesn't have much time. "I got him. It's gonna be okay."

He pulls the rings out of his pocket, and stares at Tom for a moment. The civilian who just tried to take on the Devil for Dean. Sam feels himself push Lucifer down a little bit hard, and he throws the rings to the ground, opening the cage.

"It's gonna be okay, Dean," he promises again.

Michael reappears, but it's too late. The cage is open, and Sam lets himself fall backward into the expanse. When Michael grabs him he takes hold, and pushes off against the ground. He watches Michael free falling above him, down into Hell, and sees the chasm close above them.

I did it, he thinks, *everything's gonna be okay*

Chapter 19: Scaling the Armrest

Chapter by oncethrown

This is the third time in the last 45 minutes that Tom has found himself staring into the fridge, not knowing what he's looking for. It's a little too late for a cold press, and a little too early for a beer. He's working from home again, so he probably shouldn't have a beer, but there's no real reason that he can't call it a day now. It's not like he's made any progress on this proposal in the last hour anyway. He hears the soft click of Bubble's nails on the floor as she comes over to see if there are treats now, even though Tom has been going between his computer and the fridge all day and Bubbles has been treatless so far.

He decides to reward her optimism this time and pulls out the little Tupperware of cheese cubes that are are leftover from her heart worm medication. Her tail beats against the floor in anticipation.

She gets a cube for a handshake, then another for playing dead. She gets the last one just for being a good girl, then watches Tom hopefully as he pulls his phone out of his pocket and checks the time. It's 4:45, so…Dean's only been asleep for about two hours. He promised when he went to lay down that he'd set an alarm for 5:00 today, and griped and apologized and generally been very put out that Tom had let him sleep through dinner last night.

Tom brings the now empty cheese cube Tupperware to the sink, and loses interest in continuing to work as he walks back to his desk. He's made all the progress he's going to make today. And, considering that less than a week ago, he survived the apocalypse, and looked Satan in the eye, that progress is impressive.

Tom closes his laptop and pulls out his phone, scrolling through his podcast app as he returns to the fridge. Both of his psychology podcasts have updated, but he doesn't listen to those out loud when Dean's in the house. He doesn't want Dean to feel like he's being

studied or manipulated. Or, worst of all, like he's responsible for the trouble Tom's been having.

It's been a hard week.

Tom scrolls further down in his queue. He used to love listening to The Moth while he cooked, but it's been harder to get through an entire episode since Texas. Tom gets these little spikes of terror that someone's story is going to sound too much like monsters, or that someone in the story is going to die. The one time he'd had it on this week, while Dean sat across the kitchen island from him, he'd nearly let their dinner burn because he'd been devoting so much bandwidth to being ready to turn the phone off at the first suggestion of death, or supernatural bullshit, or belief in angels or demons or any of the things people said without having any damn clue what they were talking about.

He keeps scrolling until he lands on The Thrilling Adventure Hour. He opens it up, and is just finishing deleting all of the "Beyond Belief" episodes out of the queue when he hears a syrupy chirp going off in the guest room. Dean set an alarm after all. Tom's sure that's a good sign. He pulls two beers out of the fridge, and pops the cap off of one, waiting to see if Dean actually gets up. He's been sleeping a lot.

Tom's swiping around on one of his recipe apps when hears the door to the guest bedroom open and then close. Dean lurches out, smoothing down his hair as he crosses the living room. He's got deep red pillow lines across his face, and Tom can tell by the way his clothes are wrinkled that he slept in them again, which wouldn't have bothered him, but he's pretty sure Dean slept in those clothes all night too.

"Hey," Dean says quietly, and Tom feels another quick wave of relief. He's talking already. He hadn't been able to say a word all day yesterday, even when he had been awake, and he'd had to work up to it for almost two hours the day before. Tom's surprise must have

registered on his face, because Dean looks guilty, then clears his throat. "You hungry?"

"I was thinking about getting something started," Tom replies. He points to the beer on the counter, Dean nods. Tom pops the cap off and slides it to the other side of the kitchen island.

Dean takes a grateful gulp. "I… I was thinking I could do dinner tonight. As a thank-you."

"I wouldn't mind watching you work your way around a kitchen," Tom says. He's forcing his tone too light, and he can hear it, but not stop it.

Dean hesitates. "I'm not really… great in the kitchen." He takes another drink from his beer. "Maybe I could take you out?"

Tom scratches the label of his beer with his thumbnail. "Are you sure you're up for that? I mean… last time was sort of…"

He searches for the right word to describe a pretty awful half an hour of dropping into a diner, only to have Dean clam up when the waitress came by, order by pointing, get increasingly overwhelmed, but still not be able to talk until Tom had finally had to almost drag him out to the parking lot, then leave Dean in the car while he went back in to get their meals bagged up. Dean had spent a couple minutes apologizing, and then hardly been able to speak for the next day and a half.

Dean looks down at the counter. "Would you mind… teaching me how to make something?"

"That sounds great. You wanna listen to something while we work?"

Tom waves his phone.

Dean nods, then clears his throat. "Yeah. I'd like that."

Dean just wants to give Tom a nice night. He's been a fucking mess since he came by here before the apocalypse, and since he… moved himself in afterward, he's been sleeping through most of the day and having trouble getting out of bed even when he is awake. Half the time he can't seem to get the mess in his head to turn into words, and if he leaves the house, the buzzing between his ears gets so loud that he shuts down completely.

He's not even sleeping in Tom's bed, even though Tom is having nightmares, because Tom needs to get up in the morning and work in the part of the house under the bedroom loft and the house just isn't built for two people who are so out of sync.

Dean just wants to be in sync for a couple hours. Even if it costs him all the progress he's made in the last couple days.

He wants today to be keep being a good day. He's awake when it's light out. He's talking. Tom is teaching him to chiffonade basil and crush garlic and julienne bell peppers. It's going to be okay. He has to give Tom something okay after all the nightmare shit he's rained down on him. He has to.

Tom tosses a little pile of basil leaves in front of Dean and hands him the knife. Dean replicates the scrunch-and-slice that Tom just

demonstrated, and feels a little burst of relief when Tom smiles at him.

It's nice. Tom makes Chicken Piccata while Dean watches and is occasionally tasked with chopping or stirring. The silly audio drama and it's laugh track are soothing in the background, and saves Dean from having to make much conversation. Even though it's a lot easier around Tom, Dean still sometimes worries that he needs to ration his words out. It's a relief to have something pointless in the background, saving him from wasting words on small talk while they eat. When the episode ends, Tom turns off the phone and tells Dean about the land-use proposal he's working on. His company is trying to build housing in Portland, and getting tied up with a bunch of city restrictions.

Dean rinses the dishes when they finish, and Tom loads the dishwasher.

"So… are you up for anything else?"

Dean shrugs. "Have anything in mind?"

Tom crosses his arms over his chest and ponders for a few quiet minutes. "How do you feel about going into town for a movie?"

It's a good suggestion. It'll be quiet, it'll be dark, it'll be a distraction. Dean wants to say yes and mean it. He ends up nodding, thinking that really, he just wants to go back to sleep.

"There's one I think you might like on in like… half an hour. You wanna head out?"

Dean nods again. He can do this. He can.

But…

"Hey, Tom, do you mind driving?"

Tom spends almost the entire drive into town second guessing this idea. Dean hasn't asked what the movie is, he spends the drive gazing out the window, chuckling softly just after the laugh track on the podcast starts. He's sure it's a bad idea when Dean seems to freeze up while they're getting popcorn, and then less sure when he orders a large popcorn and some milk duds and Dean quietly thanks him.

The first time he's really, completely sure that taking Dean to WALL-E was a shitty idea is about 15 minutes in, when he remembers that nearly the entire movie doesn't have dialogue. Somehow, he hadn't made the connection. His whole though process had basically been— I had a great time taking my nieces and nephews to this, it's a soft gentle movie where nothing that bad happens, and it's in space.

But Dean doesn't seem that perturbed by any of those things, and eventually Tom lets himself settle back in his seat. He needed a gentle movie too, and it's nice to be out of the house, doing something normal together, even if he does wish he had remembered more of the details of the plot involving a beautiful stranger coming to live with a heartbreakingly cute little robot.

Strangely, the thing that feels the most intense, is slowly reaching for Dean's hand.

It's silly. They've saved each other's lives. They live together. They've been… something to each other for years. He's touched Dean much more intimately than this.

But he still moves like he's worried he could spook Dean away, inching his hand across his own thigh, and slowly scaling the armchair between them. When he finally touches Dean's hand, Dean starts, but only a little. He turns away from the screen, and gives Tom a sliver of a smile as he turns his palm up, letting Tom's fingers slot between his own.

Dean's absolutely exhausted by the time they get back to Tom's. He's glad to have made Tom happy, but angry with himself for how hard it was. Holding hands in a dark, almost completely empty theater shouldn't feel like running a marathon. Prodding at an empty feeling in his chest while everyone else in the theater sniffled shouldn't feel like climbing a mountain.

And allowing Tom to pull his body close on the couch, wrap his arms around Dean's stomach and kiss his neck shouldn't feel like being suffocated, but it does. Dean tries to reciprocate, forcing his body to go loose in Tom's arms, pressing his head backward to let Tom kiss the side of his neck. He thinks he's doing well, but after a few minutes Tom stops.

"You're not up for this right now, are you?" Tom asks gently.

"I…" Dean starts. He wants to say yes. After everything Tom has done for him, Dean should be able to give him this if it's what he wants.

"Dean, it's okay," Tom says gently.

"I'm sorry."

Tom runs a hand into Dean's hair, and scratches his head gently. "Don't be. It's okay. I promise."

"I do like this," Dean offers, pulling one of Tom's hands back across his chest, and settling more naturally against Tom's body.

"Then let's put something on and keep doing this."

Tom gives Dean a little squeeze, flips through the channels until they find some old movie, and presses a kiss to the crown of Dean's head they settle back against the couch together.

Chapter 20: The Long Weekend

Chapter by oncethrown

Tom washes a thermos for the third time. From the window over the sink he can see that Dean is still out in the yard under the port cochere, methodically doing whatever he's been doing all morning. Tom's been checking on him off and on, unsure if he should go out and ask if everything is okay, or offer to help, or just let Dean go.

His angel friend had zapped both of them and the car here to the house after the fight in the graveyard a little over a month ago and Dean hasn't touched the thing since his first night here, when he'd grabbed a duffle bag out of the backseat and asked Tom if it was okay for him to just sleep on the couch that night.

But this morning Dean had gotten up early enough that the sound of the guest bedroom door closing had woken Tom up. He'd brewed a pot of coffee, pulled a bucket and sponge out from under the sink, and been outside doing mysterious car things for the last three hours.

Tom looks down at the squeaky clean, thrice-washed thermos in his hands, and realizes what a coward he's being. He dries the thermos, fills it with coffee and is about to take it out to Dean and ask him what's going on, when his phone rings as he screws the lid onto the thermos.

Dean squeezes out the sponge and checks his periphery. Tom is still standing by the windows, trying not to look like he's watching Dean. This time he's on his phone, or maybe pretending to be. After a month of laying around, sleeping through the day and only leaving the house when Tom takes him somewhere for the last month, Dean supposes it only makes sense that him actually doing something would set off alarms for Tom.

He should probably go in. Reassure Tom that he's not getting ready to leave or anything. Maybe even tell Tom the truth— he has no idea what he's doing, he just knows he can't leave Baby totally untouched all winter, but he also doesn't think he can face getting behind the wheel of it again.

Tom tucks his phone into his pocket, disappears for a moment, then reappears with a thermos and a smile.

"You looked like you could use something hot," Tom says, saluting Dean with the thermos.

The easy joke comes to Dean's mind but dies on his lips. He accepts the thermos with a smile, and leans into Tom a little when Tom wraps his arm around Dean's waist.

"What you've been up to out here all morning?"

Dean unscrews the lid of the coffee thermos and takes a sip. "I'm not sure yet."

Tom, used to Dean's silence, rubs his palm over Dean's hip and waits for him to keep going.

"It just didn't feel right to keep ignoring her, and this morning I suddenly felt bad about leaving her out here alone for so long. I don't know. I'm cleaning anything corrosive out of the wheel wells and off the undercarriage. Maybe some baking soda inside so she doesn't get stuffy. I'm gonna make sure all the fluids are clean and full up too. Organize the trunk, pack the ammo up more safely. I can't believe I haven't wrapped the tail pipe and the air vents to keep animals from getting in her. Damn lucky I didn't find a squirrel anywhere when I popped the hood."

"The car's a she?" Tom asks gently.

Dean's quiet for another moment, but unlike all the other moments where it's been a stifled, frustrated quiet, full of words he wants to force out and can't, this is a thoughtful quiet. "I… I've lived in this car since I was four. I mean… not just spent a lot of time in it. Slept in it, bled in it, learned how to tie my shoes in it. I've never… the only… consistent roof I've ever had over my head is her roof."

Tom moves a little closer to him, until they are pressed side to side. Dean drinks more coffee. "Me and Sam," he sets his hand on the sun-warmed top of the car. "This is our home."

"Have you been in the car at all since we came back here?"

Dean just shakes his head.

"Okay." Tom takes the thermos from him, drinks from it and hands it back. "Um… you know what? Let me show you something."

Dean follows him past Baby, past Bubble's large and elaborate dog run, and up a small hill. Inside a little copse of pine trees is a shed. It's not run down by any means, but it has a neglected quality about it. The paint's a little bit chipped, but only in comparison to the house. The house is loved and meticulously cared for. This is just a storage shed. There's a worn down asphalt path that loops off into the trees. Dean realizes that it connects down to the main drive, about sixty yards off the highway.Tom pops open a small plastic case and punches in a four digit code.

"The code is zero seven one eight. It's my Mom's birthday," Tom says,

punching a fifth button, then a sixth. "Then you hit enter, then open, right in a row, it doesn't open if you go to slow."

The door creaks open, revealing a clean, but dented early nineties pick up truck.

"Keys are all over here," Tom points to the wall, where a neat rack of keys hang off pegs, then taps the keys attached to an ugly bright orange foam fob. "These are for the truck. Which reminds me, I kept forgetting to grab these for you." He snags another key ring, no key chain, just three small nickel keys, off one of the pegs and hands it to Dean. "Keys to the house. Back door, front door, and the garage."

Dean takes them from him, and palms them from hand to hand.

"I… also wanted to talk to you about something," Tom says.

Dean looks up at him, Tom answers with a reassuring smile.

"I've gotta go back into the office tomorrow, and Friday, and my buddy in Portland just called. We've got a friend who moved out to Korea after college, and he's in Portland for a wedding this weekend."

"Okay."

"Would you be alright if I went up to Portland tonight, and came back Saturday afternoon?"

The question hits Dean like a glass of water to the face. "Oh. Yeah.

You know. That… umm…" He's not stupid enough to think that he's coming across cool or confident and abandons the attempt. "You don't have to worry about me if you're gone for a few days. I can take care of myself. Watch the dog. Keep the house standing."

"Alright. Are you sure?" Tom asks.

Dean bottles the worry up faster this time. "Yes. Absolutely. Go out with your friends. Have a good time. Don't worry about me."

Castiel, invisible, follows behind Dean as he takes the dog, Bubbles, out for a walk in the woods behind Tom's house. It's only the second time he's ventured out of the house alone since Castiel dropped he and Tom off in Oregon, and Castiel isn't sure what to think of his typically nomadic friend staying in one place for so long.

Dean had spent the entire day yesterday cleaning and securing the Impala, and then, after Tom had left for Portland, Dean had stood next to the car for a solid fifteen minutes before giving up and going out to the small garage toward the back of the property. He'd pounded the code into the keypad, then spent another 10 minutes sitting behind the wheel of the truck, with the keys still in his hand. Finally, Dean gave up and dragged an old bicycle out of the garage, biked into town, bought a bottle of whiskey and drunk most of it, pretending to be sober when Tom had called to check in with him.

He seems better this morning. He woke up when his alarm with off. He took Bubbles out to relieve herself, made coffee, and then stood and watched her play in her pen for a while before getting a travel mug of coffee and the dog's leash. And now they were walking in the Oregon woods.

It's a relief for Castiel to just watch one person for once. Things are not going well in Heaven, and he's very tempted to bring his troubles to Dean, but this much time watching over Dean reminds him that Dean has too many troubles of his own. Besides, the time to heal with someone who cares for him so deeply is helping Dean, even if Cas wishes there was more he could do.

Dean walks Bubbles further and further into the woods, stopping occasionally and looking back toward the house, only to eventually turn and march on, until he and the dog come to a clearing, and the dog lays down at Dean's feet, tongue lolling out of one side of her mouth.

Cas watches as Dean settles down in the grass next to Bubbles, and scratches her ears. She sets her head in his lap, and Dean starts to look around him.

"You could have told me that Oregon was beautiful," he admonishes the dog gently. "I haven't really… been giving it much of a chance. I guess."

And idea occurs to Cas. There isn't much he can do to take away Dean's pain without risking taking Dean's memories, and he's loathe to make what Dean's going through any harder by appearing to him and making him engage with the world he's trying so hard to escape right now. But there is something he can do.

Cas concentrates, and calls a deer into the clearing. It's a majestic creature, with a rack of antlers like two small trees cresting above it. He calms the dog, who simply watches the deer walk across the meadow and bend to eat a few wildflowers. As the deer looks up at Dean, Cas infuses him with a momentary, but strong and deep, sense of peace before the deer walks calmly away.

Dean scratches the dogs ears again, looks up at the mountains for a few more minutes, then gathers up the leash in his hand and starts back toward the house.

Staying with Collin for the first time since all of the apocalypse shit happened isn't quite as hard as Tom had imagined it would be. He'd nearly turned back three times on his drive Thursday night, absolutely sure that he wouldn't be able to handle the juxtaposition of his old college friends against his bizarre post apocalypse life. That he would say something crazy, or that meeting up with the people who knew him best would be too hard, or, worst of all, that trying to pretend everything was normal for a night would destroy the wall he currently had built between Portland, where his friends and job were, and where all the insane shit that happened a month ago was already being forgotten, and Carthage, where he was struggling with nightmares, and living with someone struggling not to be buried under a trauma that occasionally left him speechless, and where the apocalypse and everything it had caused was a constant ache.

But Tom slips into old patterns more easily than he expected. Thursday night he and Collin go out for a drink. They mostly talk about work, and retell a couple old college stories. Work on Friday is fine, getting easier.

It's not until drinks with Collin, Ethan, Sammy and Andy that the wall cracks.

"The waiter is flirting with you," Andy announces after they've ordered their second round of drinks.

Tom shakes his head. "I'm the only person who ordered food, and I'm

the only person in here dressed like a corporate douchebag. He's just making sure he gets his tip. Or he's just friendly."

"Friendly and cute," Andy insists.

"I am not going to hit on the waiter," Tom counters.

"That's a good call," Ethan chimes in. "You shouldn't pester people at work. Decency 101, *Andy*."

They move on. Sammy has a ton of stories about Korea, and it's nice to actually talk to him instead of just Skype. It's a nice night. It's normal enough. Until Andy asks Sammy if he has a boyfriend.

Later, Tom's sure things would have gone differently if Sammy had just said yes. If he could have just had some cute Korean boy to gush about and show off pictures of.

But he doesn't, and he blushes and reflects the question back to his friends to cover his embarrassment. Collin gets razzed about not moving in with his boyfriend of three years quite yet, as always. Andy and Ethan lament about the way dating apps seem to get worse and worse every week.

And then they all notice how quiet Tom is being on the topic. And it's not that Tom is promiscuous. He just… does alright for himself. And goddamn Andy suddenly realizes that Tom hasn't said much in a conversation where he usually has something to contribute. And he won't even entertain the idea that the waiter might like the look of him.

"Oh my god, Tommy?" Andy grabs his hand. "Are you off the market?"

It would be easy to lie. It's so complicated. And there's so much he can't say.

But he's always been a terrible liar.

"Okay." He sighs. "So… Dean?"

Andy's eyebrow arches. "Handsome Straightboy Drifter Dean Who May Not Even Exist?"

Tom huffs and digs out his phone, hitting the wake button to display a picture of Dean sitting on the floor, in front of the front windows, with Bubbles head in his hands. He shows it to the table.

"Holy shit," Ethan said. "Look at that."

"I said he was hot."

"You… did not make it clear how hot," Collin manages.

"Well. Here he is. He's actually that hot. He definitely exists. He's not straight, he's bi."

"And the drifter part?" Sammy asks, suspicion bright in his eyes.

"He's staying with me right now."

Andy's mouth drops open. "I thought you said he was the muscle for some drug cartel? Are you insane? "

"He's not in a drug cartel, I was drunk when I said that, and I was speculating on what he might do, because I didn't know."

"Do you know now?"

"He's a trucker," Tom answers before thinking. "And somehow, he didn't want to mention that to his west coast fling and ruin the romance."

"Why's he staying with you?" Ethan asks.

"His brother died, and he's having a hard time," Tom answers, leaning into the honesty while it's still available.

His friends all look askance at him. He hadn't expected any of them to jump for joy at this development. There had been too many suddenly reschedule plans and too much wild speculations and one memorable sad-drunk lament that love was too hard, and Dean was a dream to hold onto that didn't mesh with any of the realities Tom had grown up into.

"Wait," Collin said. "How long has he been staying with you?"

"A little over a month," Tom answers quietly.

There is a muffled outcry from the table, hurriedly stifled as the waiter returns with their drinks. When he leaves Tom and all of his friends stare into their glasses for a silent, tense few seconds.

"Well," Andy finally says. "I think we're going to have to meet this mysterious dream boat of yours."

Chapter 21: There is a Terrible Space Between the End and the Beginning

Chapter by oncethrown

The fresh air must have done him good. Dean brings Bubbles back home and puts her in the dog run: a huge, elaborate enclosed part of the yard. Tom had built it, and admitted that the project had gotten away from him. It went along a whole side of the house, there were tunnels to hide in and scoot through, a small trampoline that Dean had seen Bubbles jump on before, a patch of wood chips to dig in, and at the far end, a two story dog house big enough to fit a wolf-hound mix. The bottom part of the house even had a heated floor that could be switched on from inside the house.

Bubbles licks Dean's hand as he opens the door, then she walks inside, grabs one of her antlers, takes it to the dog house, bites it a couple of times, and almost immediately settles down with her eyes closed.

Dean goes inside and makes a sandwich, streams a few episodes of Doctor Sexy on Tom's fancy internet TV while fighting off a nap, and then gets up to pour himself a glass of whiskey. Somewhere before the first sip and the last, it's time. He's not sure why, but doesn't fight the feeling. He goes to his room, retrieves the keys to the Impala, and goes out into the yard. First he walks out to the shed, grabs the keys to the truck, and climbs into the driver's seat. He sticks the key into the ignition and turns it, then reaches for the clutch. His hand moves through empty air and he lets out a sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan.

"God. It's a fucking automatic," he mutters to himself.

His hands tremble on the transmission as he puts the truck in reverse, moves it carefully out of the garage, and parks it to the left side of the driveway. He walks back down to the Impala slowly, his legs turning to lead with every step and his hands clenching tighter and tighter

around the keys in his hand. He stops a couple yards from the driver's side door.

He's shaking in earnest now. He never shook facing demons, or vampires, or zombies, or werewolves or wendigos. But the idea of getting into that car again is making him almost lightheaded with terror.

It's time. He urges himself. He's been in this miserable in-between state for too long. His old life, the one he lived with his Dad and Sam in this car, is over, and if he's learned fucking anything in the last few years, it's that what's dead should stay dead. He takes another few steps, until he's standing right next to the car.

His palm is smeared with blood when he finally loosens his fingers. He has a few ragged teethmarks from the key cutting up his skin. He wipes the key dry on the inside of his jacket cuff, opens the door and drops down behind the wheel. Muscle memory turns the engine, puts the car into the gear and gets him reversed all the way down to where Tom's driveway forks. By the time he pulls the Impala into the garage, there are tears streaming down his face, and he's panting like he pushed the car up the driveway.

He parks, pulls the key out, drops onto his back across the front bench and cries until he's sobbing. Chest heaving, gasping. He can feel snot running out of his stuffed up nose and feel his face puff up. He lets go. Every time he's stopped himself from crying in the last month, every time he stopped crying for the last few years, it pours out of him until he's empty. He stares up at the roof of the Impala until his phone rings.

"You wanna make rum and cokes and watch music videos?" Collin asks as he unlocks his apartment door.

"Yeah, sure thing," Tom replies. "I'll be with you in just a second?"

"Cool. It's my house, and my rum, so we're gonna start with Kings of Leon."

"Fair enough." Tom laughs, slipping into Collin's bathroom and pulling his phone out of his pocket. He calls Dean. He'd sounded a little off when Tom called him last night.

"Uh, hey." Dean sounds terrible. "Hey, Tom, what's up?"

"I'm just calling to check in, see how your day was."

"It was great," Dean replies too quickly. He sounds stuffed up and tired. "TV. Lunch. I uh… took Bubbles out for a walk. Long walk. Hike really and--" He clears his throat. "Okay. No. It's been a hard day. I'm not doing great. I… I'm in the Impala. I put it away today."

Tom leans back against the sink. "Wow. That's a big step."

"I uh. I hope that's okay. If I drive the truck sometimes. I mean, I'm not doing much driving right now but maybe if I got a job or something it would be far enough out in the future maybe I could drive the Impala again or—"

"Dean, it's okay. You can drive the truck. As long as you need. I only use it to drive back and forth to Lowes anyway. That's why I showed you where the key was."

"Okay. Thank you."

"I wish there was something I could do for you tonight. I'm too drunk to drive home."

"That's my plan for the night," Dean replies with a mirthless laugh.

"You should do that out in the hot tub. Bet it would make you feel better. The switch is by the fireplace in the main room. Takes about forty five minutes to heat up all the way."

"I might do just that," Dean says.

"Okay," Tom says. His stomach twists. He knows he deserves a break from Dean's grief, and can imagine it's actually been a little easier for Dean to process everything after a little more solitude than he's been used to lately, but it's hard to hear him sound this distraught when there's nothing Tom can do for him. "Well, my friend is waiting up for me, but… I'll be home tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay, good." Dean replies.

"We can make dinner together. I'll pick something up."

"I'd like that."

"Call me if you need anything?"

"Yeah. I will. Thanks, Tom."

"Yeah."

There's a pause before Tom says "Okay. See you then. Goodnight."

"Goodnight. I…" Dean starts, then clears his throat. "Goodnight."

When Tom opens the door, Collin is standing on the other side, holding a rum and coke in each hand.

"You were eavesdropping," Tom sighs.

"You installed *Dean Winchester* in your house. I think I can make sure you have your head on straight."

"And what did you determine from what you could make out through your cheap veneer door?"

Collin rolls his eyes. "That you gave him a car. That you aren't just letting him crash with you— he lives there. He lives with you."

"Collin—" Tom starts.

"*And* that you really do care about him… and maybe… I need to press pause on my gut feeling that he's shady. Maybe casing your house.

Possibly stealing your TV right now. Just using you as a hotel and meal pass."

Tom reaches out and takes one of the rum and cokes from Collin. "I know your heart is in the right place… but Dean's important to me. He cares about me and I need you to give him a chance."

Collin sucks his teeth, and takes a couple deep gulps from his rum and coke. "Okay. Let's put on some music videos, let me get through this drink, and then tell me all about whatever magic made Dean Winchester into boyfriend material."

Dean takes Tom's advice, and flips on the switch for the hot tub when he finally drags himself back down to the house. He isn't sure if he'll actually use it or not, but he likes the idea of being able to text Tom and tell him that it helped.

He heats up some leftover spaghetti and tries to eat it, but ends up just stabbing the meatballs one by one, and nibbling on them like a rabbit eating clover until he gives up and dumps the noodles back into the Tupperware they came out of, and grabbing the whiskey off the counter on his way back to the couch. The first sip burns, but at least it fills the emptiness in his chest with warmth. He wonders if putting the Impala away was a good idea or no not. He feels more like shit than he has in weeks, but it is a little bit of a relief to know that he was right about not being able to drive it away. He takes another pull of whiskey.

It probably is good for him to get out of the house. The only time since the apocalypse started that he hasn't felt at least a little like

eating a bullet was today out in the meadow, watching that deer walk by. Maybe he should start going out with Tom when he walks Bubbles. That feeling— that peaceful, maybe even happy feeling, at least exists out there… unlike his old life.

He drinks more whiskey, and decides to go check on the dog. She perks up when she sees him enter the dog run, trots over to him with her antler in her mouth, but he can tell he tired her our with their epic hike today. She plays a little tug-of-war with him, then sets her head on his knee. He scratches her ears and she licks his fingers whenever he stops.

"I've never really been a dog person," he tells her. "Or a hiking person. Or a…nature person. Outside… in general. Not really my deal."

Bubbles doesn't reply. Dean drinks more whiskey and pats her flank. "But we had a good day today, right? Good girl."

He pets her a little longer, until he realizes the odd sound at the edge of his perception is the hot tub water bubbling. He stands up, and Bubbles licks his hand again and goes back to her fancy dog house.

Dean walks to the edge of the hot tub, pulls off the cover, takes off all of his clothes, and lowers himself into the hot water.

"So," Collin asks, bringing out another round of rum and coke. "Dean Winchester. What is the big secret I'm missing that will make me change my mind?"

Tom laughs. If Collin only knew. "That he's sweet," Tom answers.

"A lot of guys are sweet. Guys with jobs. Addresses. Guy's who don't have loaded guns in their duffle bags."

"This is still Oregon. A lot of people have guns. I have guns," Tom counters.

"Shot guns for defending the dog from coyotes and scaring off bears are not a pearl handled gigantic handgun."

Tom shrugs. "I can tell the gun thing— which I shouldn't have told you about, and which happened years and years ago, is just your lead in."

Collin looks him in the eye, takes a drink from his rum and coke, and says, "Fine. The thing that makes me worry about him is how much you obviously don't tell us about him. He's been living in your house for a month, and you told us tonight. I called you you two weeks ago, and I had no idea he was there. You'd had him home a couple times before you ever brought it up with anyone. The way you hide him is weird. And like… when he was just your mysterious fuck-buddy… okay. I get how that's not something you send a text about before he's even out of the driveway… but you've been weird about him in the last year. You disappeared for a week. I feel like there's a bunch of stuff you don't want us to know about *you* because of him."

"I've been weird about him in the last year?" Tom asks.

"You've been… different since you went to Texas. And it took a while before you admitted that you went out to dinner with him while he was there, and that he came out to his brother… and I… look, I've known you since college. I know how much the thing with Dean when

you were in high school messed with you, and I obviously want to believe that you're just… like having a romantic ending to that whole story… but I can't shake the feeling that something else is going on, and you're not telling me about it."

Tom accepts that with a nod. His throat feels tight as he swallows and he gulps down half of his rum and coke trying to make the feeling go away. But Collin is his best friend.

"You're right. There's something I'm not telling you."

Chapter 22: Full of Monsters

Chapter by oncethrown

Dean stands naked on the deck, experiencing the slow chill of the cool breeze, as well as the utter absurdity of real privacy. Carthage proper is about three miles to the east. It's a few streets of businesses and not much else. A general store, a couple boutiques and a library. A liquor store, a run down bar, and a fussy little brewery: the only thing in town that looks new.

But there's nothing and no one in any other direction. Dean is actually alone. It's strange. He can't remember the last time he was really alone. For the last few years there's been Sam and Cas, yeah, but there's also been people shouting at each other from the other side of thin motel walls. People walking by diner windows. Even in the dead of night on the highway, semi trucks would cruise past.

But here, he's bare to the world.

Bare to the world, and sore. As Dean steps out of his jeans he realizes that his walk in the woods today was a lot to ask of a body that's spent most of the last month moving between bed and couch. His hips are stiff. His thighs ache. His calves actually hurt as he steps toward the water.

He jumps at a soft noise, then realizes it was just Bubbles, standing up on her back legs and setting her front paws against the fence while she watches him. Dean says something to her, some sort of soft nonsense as the breeze comes back up and he shivers, realizing that he hasn't carried his gun in weeks, and it's hidden in the frame of his bed right now. The only knife in the jeans lying on the deck is a utility knife, the kind any civilian might carry with a file and a pliers in it. There is a lock pick in his shoe, but only because that's where he's always kept it.

He watches Bubbles as her tongue lolls out for a moment, then grabs his bottle of whiskey and goes back into the house. He grabs a towel from the bathroom, then goes to the kitchen, where he swaps the whiskey for wine, and grabs a sleeve of Tom's nice crackers and the cheese Tupperware that isn't for Bubble's meds. He catches his reflection in the stainless steel door of the fridge, and realizes that he's rounder around his belly than he has ever been in his life. He turns, seeing if the rest of him seems as round, and then telling himself it's just because of the foggy, curved metal.

The breeze across his bare skin and sore muscles is cold, rather than cool, this time, and Dean sighs gratefully as he sinks into the glass smooth hot water and lets his head fall back against the rim before grabbing the wine bottle.

He's never voluntarily drunk wine when something else was available, but the smoothness of it is nice, compared to the bite of whiskey. It's even a little bit sweet.

For a while, Dean just sits in the still water, letting the warmth work into his sore muscles. He sinks further down into the warmth and sighs with pleasure.

And then he realizes that he's feeling… pleasure. He looks down between his legs, where he sees that, yes, his cock is starting to plump. He watches it with detachment for a few moments before he realizes that he hasn't even touched himself since before the apocalypse.

Wait, no, once in a motel shower, mechanical and perfunctory, just to take the edge off so he could sleep. And once here at Tom's, quick and pleasureless, just so he didn't have to walk out into the kitchen with morning wood. When was the last time he actually did it to make himself feel good?

He eats another cracker with cheese and takes another gulp of wine. When this seems to make him harder he wonders if there's something wrong with him, like maybe he has some sort of weirdo cheese perversion that he is only now finding out about, but he lets his hand drop under the water anyway, and settles it over his upper thigh.

He has more time and privacy than he ever could have imagined.

Dean shifts even further down in the water, settles his hand around his cock and strokes himself idly as he casts around for a fantasy to get things going.

He feels obligated to think about Tom. He lives in Tom's house, they make dinner together and cuddle on the couch at night, plus the last time he was in this hot tub he was naked with Tom after he'd come so hard he'd shaken for a little while afterward.

He tries, but the image of Tom, hanging over him with his forelock sweaty and his cheeks flush, is swept away by guilt. Dean isn't even sleeping in his bed right now. They haven't had sex since Dean drove out here to say goodbye and everything has changed since then. He closes his eyes, and tries to imagine himself waiting for Tom when he comes back tomorrow. Welcoming Tom home naked. Laughing and kissing and …goddamnit. *Making Love*. Like they usually did.

It's just not doing it for him. Any thought of what he and Tom have done together, or what they could do together leads Dean further down a guilty anxiety spiral about what they are not doing now.

Dean sighs in frustration, and takes another sip of wine from the bottle.

Doctor Sexy briefly presents himself as an option, but Dean feels himself flag at that. That fantasy is too bound up with Sam and the apocalypse now.

Gunnar Lawless? It's been years since he's dredged up that fantasy, and the rough edges of shame and confusion and what little childhood innocence he'd had left smacking headfirst into a sudden rush of hormones makes it unpleasantly nostalgic instead of sexy.

Dean gives up. He shoves a couple crackers and more cheese into his mouth, then grabs the wine to wash it down. The bottle passes in front of the patio lights as he hold it, the deep red glint reminding him of the way the moonlight caught in Anna's hair that night in the Impala.

He takes a gulp of the wine, then another, and sets the bottle back down. He leans back further in the water and focuses on that memory — just that part of it, not the part where she'd turned on them and he'd had to go back in time and kill her— as hard as he can. The floral and ozone scent of her clothes and the sea salt smell of her body. The contrast between her slight waist and her full breasts under his hands. The warmth of sliding into her.

But also the way he'd felt the night with her.

The way that being with her had made the dark thing in his chest feel less heavy. The way she had tried to understand him. The way she had kissed his cheek after he'd turned her in to save Sam.

He pulls away from those thoughts— the ones about feeling— and tries to focus on the physical. The little touch of novelty in the memory of her body, because now that he thinks about it, he hasn't had sex with a woman since Anna.

He focuses on the pale column of her throat as she threw her head back, the way she'd driven her hips down on to him, over and over. He moves his hand faster and faster overall himself, concentrating on the feeling of her moving on him until he finally feels himself on the edge.

He realizes with a flash that he doesn't know what happens if he comes in the hot tub and hauls himself up over the edge of the tub just in time to come across the deck with a surprised yelp that makes the dog bark.

Dean falls onto his elbows gasping at the aftershock of his orgasm and of the cold wind whipping across his wet skin. He hangs over the deck for a few moments, relishing the terrible sting of the cold biting into the orgasm like a punishment.

But then the dog whines, and Dean sinks back down into the tub, the water tugging him back down into the warmth the way Tom has pulled him back down into warm blankets more than once.

And Dean suddenly realizes why he has so much trouble coaxing himself into Tom's bed, and why he goes rigid when Tom tries to do any thing more than hold or kiss him. Why, after years and years of sex with Tom being a night off, sometimes even a balm, Dean is sleeping in the guest room.

"Fuck," Dean huffs, settling further down in the water.

"I've been weird about him in the last year?" Tom asks.

"You've been… different since you went to Texas. And it took a while before you admitted that you went out to dinner with Dean while he was there, and that he came out to his brother… and I… look, I've known you since college. I know how much the thing with Dean when you were in high school messed with you, and I obviously want to believe that you're just… like having a romantic ending to that whole story… but I can't shake the feeling that something else is going on, and you're not telling me about it."

Tom accepts that with a nod. His throat feels tight as he swallows and he gulps down half of his rum and coke trying to make the feeling go away. But Collin is his best friend.

"You're right. There's something I'm not telling you."

Collin bites his lip. Tom watches him while he carefully rearranges his face into his mildly annoying "I'm here for you" expression.

"Okay," Tom says, before taking a gulp of his drink. "I know how this sounds, and I don't have proof, and I… don't know how to make it sound real… while I was in Texas… I found out that monsters are real."

He's not that surprised to see Collin fail to react beyond biting his lip again. Collin does that when he's really listening, he's not a judgmental person, and that fact and this much rum are the reasons Tom is even trying to confess this.

His voice drops to a whisper. "That's what Dean does. What his whole family did. They hunt monsters. He's told me… insane stories, Colin. Hospital monsters and cave monsters and vampires and werewolves and I know how crazy I sound… but you know me. I'm not like… a whimsical person. You know that Dean would have had to have shown me really big evidence for me to believe this."

Collin nods slowly. Opens his mouth, shuts it again and clears his throat. "Did… you not… know about monsters before?"

Tom runs this sentence through his mind several times and it continues to fail to make sense. "Before what?"

"Before whatever happened in Texas? Like… that was… You mean you never had like… you know… " he holds his fingers up and starts making air quotes, "officially unexplained events" or whatever in your town?"

Tom stares at Collin. "I'm sorry… are you saying you knew about monsters? I'm talking about *actual* *literal* monsters, Collin. Demons. Blood thirsty… creatures."

Collin sets his drink down and presses his hands together in front of his chest. "When I was in middle school a ton of kids got this weird flu and died in the hospital, and then were brought back to life by magic blue birds. We weren't allowed to drive down 126 at night because there was a vampire nest out there."

Tom feels his face growing hot. "Are you fucking with me?"

"No!" Collin responds immediately. "I thought… this is just a thing in the Pacific Northwest. Right? Everyone at my school knew about it. It's just… like… a local things. Like… you know how Ethan's always talking about how in Minnesota you can't buy alcohol on Sunday and every year there's a big news hubbub when someone's dog gets eaten like a mountain lion? Like that."

"Why didn't you ever bring up monsters, Collin?"

"Cause people who aren't from Oregon never believe it. It's always on the news."

"You never said anything about this to me!" Tom shouts.

"You're… from Oregon," Collin yells back. "I thought you knew!"

"No!" Tom says. "Your town is just… super full of monsters."

Collin bursts out laughing, and laughs so long that Tom starts laughing too. Every time they are about to calm down, one of them sets the other off, until Tom's ribs hurt and he goes to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face and calm down.

When Tom comes back out to the living room Collin has refilled their drinks and is wiping tears from his eyes. "Okay," he says, "So… that's the big secret about Dean…now can you really tell me about him?"

Chapter 23: "I Know"

Chapter by oncethrown

Dean's fingers are so badly cramped around the steering wheel by the time he pulls into the general store that he can't feel his pinky or ring finger on either hand. He sits in the truck, stretching his fingers over and over while he waits for the blood to flow back. When he does finally regain all the feeling in his hands, he grabs his phone and listens to the voicemail Tom left for him this morning.

Again.

"Hey, Dean," Tom's recorded voice groans in his ear. "I know I said I'd be back this afternoon, but… I am… uh. So, so hungover. I just woke up, I'm gonna take it easy, then grab late brunch with the guys. Urghh. Really late brunch. I'm really sorry. Hope it's okay if I don't see you until tonight. Love you." The message pauses, there is a sound of shuffling and then Tom again. "Uh. Okay." Then a beep.

Dean closes the message, double checks that his ringer is still on, tries to turn the ringer volume up, which doesn't work because it's already turned up all the way, then tucks his phone into his pocket. He stretches his fingers a few more times, then finally climbs out of the car and goes into the general store.

Chicken Piccatta.

Tom showed him how to make it. Protein is good for a hangover. It's only got like four ingredients, so he can probably pick all of them up before he gets overwhelmed.

This is Dean's first trip out of the house by himself in a car. It's the

first time he's driven more than a couple hundred yards in nearly two months. He's already shaking, and he's furious with himself that something this small is so hard.

Also, apparently Tom loves him. Which makes everything… harder.

Dean grabs a hand basket by the door and finds himself confronted by the produce section. Usually, this is Sam's deal. Dean, on the occasion that they had ended up in a real grocery store and not just a gas station tended to head for the bakery, then the canned goods.

But that was then.

Dean successfully acquires a lemon, and tosses it into his basket with very little fuss before launching himself toward the pasta aisle.

The thing is, when Tom said "love you" on the machine, it had been sort of a throwaway, goodbye type of "love you". Dean had heard Tom say it the same way when he got off the phone with his sisters, or his parents. Maybe it was just sort of a habit.

Dean had not been aware that there were so many variations of pasta. He stands in the aisle, staring in bewilderment for a moment before noticing the capers right next to the row of boxes. He knocks a bottle into his basket and resumes being dwarfed by a wall of pasta.

Spaghetti. He knows that's not what Tom had used when he taught Dean to make this, but… pasta all tastes the same. Right?

What if there's some reason that it has to be Not-Spaghetti?

What if Tom had meant it when he said "Love you"? Was that better or worse than him saying it by accident because he was hungover, or tired?

Linguine? That can't be right. It's just flatter spaghetti.

Oh god. Whether Tom meant it or not they have to talk about it. And of course he didn't mean it. He was tired, he was hung over, it was perfectly clear from the end of the message that he had said it by mistake.

Does Dean love him back?

Heart pounding, Dean grabs the nearest box of pasta without looking at what it is, and marches toward the butcher counter at the back of the store.

Maybe Dean loves him back?

Would he die to save Tom? Dean asks himself. The yes comes too easily, and it's not until Dean reaches the butcher's counter that he realizes that's not a good mark of love, and it's not exactly a practical one in his current life. Drinking wine in the hot tub and walking the dog are not exactly death defying feats.

The butcher, a clean cut young man with an honest to god folded paper hat gives him a bored smile. "What'll it be today?"

Dean opens his mouth to speak and nothing comes out.

He tries again, another level of anxiety rising.

It's been at least a week since this has happened. The clench in his throat that prevents anything from getting out, like he's got a wine cork shoved down his gullet.

He clears his throat, forces a smile and tries again.

All he manages is a raspy squeak.

He shuffles the basket onto his left arm and uses his right hand to rub at his throat. The butcher is giving him a look somewhere between concerned and annoyed. Dean clears his throat again and steps closer.

He tries to force out the word chicken, but just manages another rasp. He feels the grocery store spin around him for a moment before he thinks to just point at the globs of pink meat.

The butcher looks at him for a moment, then quirks his head to the side, brings a hand to his mouth and pinches his fingers together with one hand before driving them into the palm of his other hand. He does it a couple times before Dean steps closer, taps on the glass and hold up 6 fingers.

"6 Pounds?" The guy asks.

Does a chicken breast weigh a pound? Dean wonders. He rubs his throat again, and holds up six fingers.

"Six chicken breasts?" The butcher says. Dean gives him a thumbs up.

The butcher piles them up on brown paper, wraps them and hands them off, and Dean hurries to the front of the store, relief flooding his body when he sees the self service checkouts. He has another freeze up when he realizes that Tom gave him all the money in his pockets, but just jams everything into the grocery bag and hurries back out to the truck. It takes several minutes of gasping for air before he sticks the keys in the ignition, but he weathers the rumbling of the engine, and backs out of his parking space.

"You fucking moron," Tom repeats to himself under his breath again. The only good thing about all the ways he's gone insane since leaving for Portland is the fact that he didn't call Dean while completely wasted and tell Dean that he loved him. Because if Tom's honest with himself, he said it because it's true. And it's been true since before Dean saved him from those Reapers, and it's still true now that Dean loses his voice and can't always sleep through the night and sometimes jumps when you talk to him.

If Tom's *completely* honest with himself there are a couple feelings about having traumatized Dean Winchester in his house that he's not ready to interrogate quite yet… but mostly, he likes having Dean around, even when it's hard. He likes knowing that Dean is getting better, even if it's slow going. He loves when he says or does something that makes Dean smile. He loves quiet evenings together. He loves Dean.

And he should not have told Dean the way that he did, but he can't take it back now and he doesn't want to.

He just has to go and talk to Dean about it now and make sure Dean realizes that he means it… and deal with however Dean feels in return.

He pulls into the general store parking lot and texts Dean. "Hey, anything you want for dinner? I'm getting groceries."

His phone beeps as he walks into the store. "I already got us groceries."

The surprise fizzles in Tom's head for a moment and another line of dots shows up. "Are you nearly back?"

Tom confirms that he's in town, and he's just going to pick up some shaving cream and head home.

"Okay. I'll get dinner started." Dean texts back.

Tom stops where he's standing in the aisle. Dean has never initiated dinner. He'll chop and stir and flip when asked, but he's never… made them dinner. The uncharitable thought crosses Tom's mind that maybe a back up dinner might be in order… but it's chased away by the realization that he told Dean he loved him, and Dean went into down to get groceries. For a dinner. That he is going to make for them.

A warmth kicks up in Tom's chest. He leaves the aisle of soap and toiletries and heads for the bakery.

Tom gets home to his huge dog jumping for joy that he came home, the smell of spiced chicken and lemon frying, and, as he hands over the apple pie that he picked up, the realization that Dean can't talk again.

Also, a sneaking suspicion of what scared his voice off this time.

Tom's not sure what he should do, but he at least knows enough now not to treat Dean like he's fragile, or push him too hard. So, he does his best to push away the discussion he had hoped to start and the questions he wanted to ask. He hands Dean a beer out of the fridge, grabs an ice tea for himself, and tells Dean about catching up with his friends, leaving out the part where they want to meet him, and holding out on the part where he found out that Collin knows all about monsters.

Dean nods along, smiling. Eventually laughs. Manages a word here and there once they are both sitting at the kitchen island, chatting over their plates. After they eat, Tom turns the fireplace on. Dean puts on a record while Tom does the dishes and puts away leftovers. When he puts the last plate in the dishwasher and turns the knob, he turns to see Dean, sitting on the couch out in the main room, the firelight playing over his skin, and shining in his bright green eyes. The sight causes a yearning little ache in his chest, like pressing your finger into a bruise.

Yeah. He really does love him, and he really picked the shittiest day to say something.

Dean's almost starting to be relieved that he can't talk tonight. Instead of a long, awkward discussion, he and Tom are just having a normal night together. Tom liked the dinner he made, and seemed strangely impressed that Dean was able to so easily recreate the meal after only

seeing it done once.

Dean lays on the couch, listening to a record while Tom does dishes, then responds to work emails for a little bit until he's yawning too much to keep working. They move over to the couch and put on a movie.

Dean watches Tom out of the corner of his eye.

How do you even know if you love someone? He's known Tom for so long. He's had so many firsts with him. Tom has always been so careful with him. So understanding. Even now, Dean can tell Tom wants to talk about it. Wants Dean to be able to say something. Anything. And he's not pushing.

But this… a relationship. Staying in one place. Living with someone who isn't Sam. Being taken care of like this. Dean has no idea what any of this is supposed to feel like.

Tom starts to snore lightly, an intermittent wheeze that develops a whistle at the end as he sinks lower and lower down on the couch. Dean shakes him slightly. "Fell asleep," he manages when Tom looks up at him groggily.

Tom nods, stretches, then stands up. "Right. Uh…" Tom clears his throat, and looks at Dean for just a moment too long. "You know, I'm really wiped. I think I'm just going to call it a night."

Dean nods. He tries for an 'okay' or a 'good night' but can't conjure one up, and gives up. Tom bends down and kisses his temple. "Goodnight, Dean."

Dean watches Tom go upstairs, turns the volume on the TV down lower and listens to the little squeaks of Tom moving across the loft floor over head, then the flap and shuffle of Tom whipping his blankets back, then yanking them back up. Finally, there's the tiniest click, and Tom's bedside light shuts off.

What Dean does know he wants, is for Tom to know that he cares. That he wants Tom to be happy, that he wants Tom to know… that whatever it is Dean does feel about him… he feels it a lot.

Dean turns off the TV. He sits in the dark for a few seconds, then, as though his feet have received orders his brain wasn't privy too, he marches back to his room. He grabs his pajamas off the floor and changes, then goes back out to the main room. He stands under the loft, debating if this is really going to say what he can't say, then realizes that, even if this isn't the right thing, Tom will accept it.

He walks up the stairs, and the light flicks back on as he reaches the top.

"Everything okay?" Tom asks, his eyes traveling up and down Dean's borrowed pajamas, light flannel pants and an old tee shirt.

Dean gulps and nods, then slowly approaches Tom's bed. Tom watches, saying nothing as Dean pulls the covers back, then edges underneath them. He lays his head down on the pillow, and Tom does the same. Dean fiddles with the blankets for a moment, letting himself smooth out his breathing before he turns on his side, lays his head on Tom's shoulder, and drapes an arm over Tom's chest.

Tom is tight underneath him for a few seconds, but then his arm comes up around Dean's back. He turns off the bedside light, and kisses the top of Dean's head.

They lay together until Dean starts to get drowsy, and Tom has to reposition because his arm is falling asleep. They wind up spooning on Tom's side of the bed, fingers linked under the pillows between them.

"Dean?" Tom whispers. "I love you."

Dean hates the raspy sound that gurgles out of his throat as he tries to reply. It's not better the second time. So he squeezes Tom's fingers tight and kisses the back of his head, and hopes Tom knows how much he wants to say it.

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